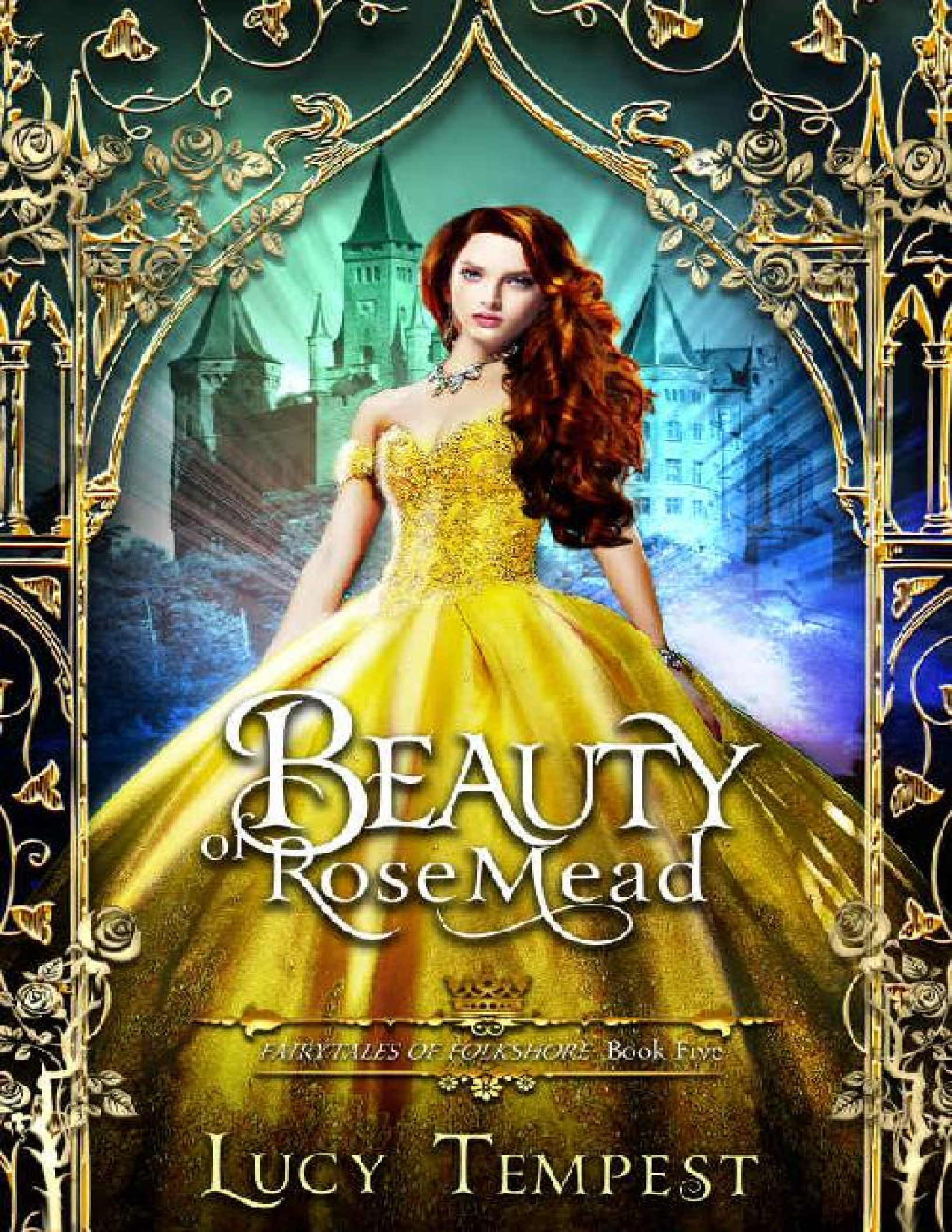
Beauty of Rose Mead
Fairytales of Folkshore: Book Five
Lucy Tempest

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BEAUTY OF ROSEMEAD

FAIRYTALES OF FOLKSHORE: BOOK FIVE

LUCY TEMPEST

BEAUTY OF ROSEMEAD – A RETELLING OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

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It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye. It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important. Men have forgotten this truth,' said the fox. 'But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose...'

— THE LITTLE PRINCE, ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

CONTENTS

Introduction
Map

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Epilogue

Note From the Author
Family Tree
Pronunciation Guide
About the Author
Also by Lucy Tempest

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the magical world of Folkshore!

Fairytales of Folkshore is a series of interconnected fairytale retellings with unique twists on much-loved, enduring themes. It starts with the Cahraman Trilogy, a gender-swapped reimagining of Aladdin.

It is followed by the Rosemead duology, a retelling of Beauty & the Beast.

Join each heroine on emotional, thrilling adventures full of magic, mystery, friendship and romance where true love is found in the most unexpected places and the fates of kingdoms hang in the balance.

Coming retellings will be:

Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Hades & Persephone and The Little Mermaid!

MAP

Faerie
The Fair-Folk Ocean
N
W
E
S
ERICURA
THE NORTHLAND KINGDOMS
OPONA
ARMORICA
AVONGART
ORLAGE
LYONESSE
UPPER CAMPANIA
The Forbidden Ocean
ARBORE
ROSEHEAD
ALMASKHAM
IACOBT
SILVER SEA
ECLANTINE
ORESTIA
CAHRAMAN
ANSUR
TRIESTE
LOWER CAMPANIA
DEEP RED SEA
SUNSTONE
The Silent Ocean
THE GRANARY
GEMISHT
MERJAN
AVESTA

CHAPTER ONE

The Hornswoods loomed in the distance. Towering, gloomy, and menacing. The forbidden gateway to the unknown, to a world beyond our own from where none had ever returned. And the one place I'd longed to enter since I was six.

Yet the opportunity to take whatever path lay beyond the trees was not paved with excitement, as I had often fantasized. With every step closer to the woods, I felt nothing but rising worry—and fury. Leander had sent me back home against my will! He'd chosen to continue on our quest without me. A quest he knew he couldn't complete without me.

All he'd achieved was to make it harder and more dangerous for us all. If they had reached Faerie, they must be trying to come up with a new plan that didn't include me, their time running out. In order to rejoin him and our friends, I had to go through the woods alone, face whatever perils existed inside, and hope I'd exit in one piece—*and* end up in the same place as them.

If I did, they would be very easy to spot or ask about. Leander had turned from the Crown Prince of Arbore into the Beast of Rosemead, a towering wolfman, while Clancy was now a bespectacled satyr, and Jessamine a blazing-red harpy—the transformations courtesy of a curse that I had promised to help break once we found the fairy queen who had cast it.

I hoped those inhuman states allowed them a safe passage through Nexia, the layover island between the Folkshore and the Fair-Folk's Shore. Its inhabitants had wanted anyone human like Will and Robin—or seemingly human like me—off their land, turning the very island against

us. It was part of an isolationist stance against its warring, neighboring kingdoms, one of which was Leander's Kingdom of Arbore.

None of that mattered now. I could only focus on what I wanted to achieve. And it all hinged on finally running through the woods and crossing Man's Reach, the barrier that marked the end of the human world.

I was halfway to achieving that life-long dream, turned terrible necessity, when I stopped dead.

It wasn't second thoughts that brought me to a staggering halt. Nor was it the guardian sculpture in the distance striking the fear of the Horned God into my heart. It wasn't even my realization that I needed supplies before I ventured on what could be a one-way trek.

It was my house.

The two-story, stone structure sat across the field from the woods, exactly as I remembered it. I tried not to stare at it as I approached it. Not only had it always been the place I wanted to leave, but it now stood abandoned, with my father and best friend Ada gone. Both taken from me, snatched by fairies. It was now a reminder of the life I'd wanted to escape and the loved ones I'd lost. But I averted my eyes from it and kept them fixed on the ground. As I neared it, I saw a trail of fresh blood leading right into its open door.

Someone had broken into my house!

Was the blood from a carcass the intruder had dragged in? Or was it the other way around? Had the blood dripped from the sharp fangs of a man-eating creature that had come through the woods? Had it attacked the first unfortunate human it met and was now inside, feasting?

After what I'd experienced since first being plucked from my home by that fairy woman who'd abducted Ada, and was tossed into Arbore, I would consider anything.

Heart thundering, I looked around, but found no one. Not knowing what to do, my mind was racing with the single idea that I should go seek help.

But from whom? I didn't know where my father's apprentices lived. Who else could I get? Miss Etheline? The people who worked at the tavern? What could they even do against a fairy creature, if that was indeed what was in there?

Before I dragged anyone else into this, I at least needed to know what I was up against.

Shaking all over, I tiptoed to the nearest ground-floor window and peeked inside the sitting room. I heard clattering noises coming from near the kitchen.

Suddenly, my stuttering breath left my lungs in a harsh exhalation, anxiety burning in a flare of blinding anger. I'd had the worst day of my life, not only losing everyone I loved, but possibly even the hope of retrieving them. I was enraged and desperate, and there was no one left to worry about me. So I no longer worried about me.

And I needed the supplies inside my house—things the intruder could be looting now, or the monster could be destroying.

Blood boiling, I took out the hunting knife I'd acquired during the attack on Leander's castle in Rosemead and burst in, ready to attack whatever I found.

But the huddled shape who spun away from the open cupboard wasn't an intruder or a monster.

It was my father.

He stood there, gaping back at me, bleeding from his forehead and holding an iron poker covered in what appeared to be dried, maroon blood.

That was it. I was hallucinating. My father was in Faerie. After the attack of the townspeople on the castle—which he'd led to save me from the beast all believed Leander to be—the mysterious Robin had seen a fairy snatching my father and disappearing. I'd collapsed at the news. Everything I thought had happened since then must have been the exhausting sequence of an endless dream.

That would actually be the best possibility. It would mean we hadn't planned to enter Faerie to retrieve Adelaide and my father, and negotiate with the Spring Queen to break Leander's curse. It would mean the string of disastrous setbacks ending in Leander pushing me into a portal, sending me back home to Ericura hadn't happened. I would wake up and find myself still in the castle, with Leander and the others. I would have another chance to do things the right way.

But my house and my father looked real. Too real. Even if they weren't and this was a dream, I was deliriously happy to see him again.

And he appeared as happy—and as shocked—to see me. But he reacted first, disbelieving relief flooding his grey eyes as he rushed to me. Totally unwary of the knife I was holding, he ducked down and scooped me up

like he had when he found me unharmed at the castle. It was only when he squeezed me breathless that I knew he was definitely real.

When he set me down, still babbling about being unable to believe I was home and that he had to put the kettle on the fire, I gripped his forearms, arresting his runaway agitation.

"Dad. *Dad*—how did you get here? Robin told me a fairy took you!" Before he could answer me, infected by his unstable energy and my own crackling curiosity, more questions spilled from my lips, bombarding him. "Whose blood is on the poker? Is this blood? It actually looks purple. And what happened to your head?"

He touched his oozing injury as if he'd forgotten about it. "Ah, yes. You are not going to believe this."

I rushed to fetch a clean towel, hassled him onto a kitchen stool, and started cleaning his wound. "Trust me, I would believe anything now."

"I suppose you would, after two weeks with that werewolf prince, or whatever he was." He raised the bloody poker. "But I already told you, and this entire town, that this woman Dufreyne married *is not human*."

My jaw dropped.

I thought nothing could surprise me by now. Guess I was wrong.

I knew that he, and most of Aubenaire, intensely disliked our resident merchant-lord's new wife, Dolora. Adelaide had thought her a monster for how she mistreated everyone, especially her stepdaughter, Ornella.

But I had to make sure I'd heard him right. "You mean literally?"

"Yes." He nodded fervently, dead serious. "When I found myself back here, I found Ella running towards me. She must have been trying to reach our house. That woman and her daughters were chasing her down like an animal. She caught her and beat her while they kicked her down and dragged her on the ground by her hair."

Adelaide thought they'd made Ella a slave in her own home. But we hadn't seen evidence they'd been physically abusing her too. The thought of those women doing so now, and so openly, raised my enraged heat to combustion levels. "What did you do?"

"What I did at that castle when I thought I was attacking monsters to get to you," he seethed. "I rushed into the house and grabbed the poker and fought them off. They converged on me, changing into something else—ogres or trolls!" He gestured to the cut on his head, lips tight with

brimming anger. “She clawed my face and I hit her with the poker, but another one knocked me over the head, and they dragged the girl away.”

I couldn’t bear thinking what would happen to Ella now, after she’d caused them to expose themselves as monsters. These women were truly the beasts in a hilltop mansion, torturing the poor girl they held hostage, not Leander and his staff. The fact that they’d been getting away with this for years … that no one, including me, had ever cared enough to intervene on her behalf, was horrific.

I didn’t know how long it would take for me to find and help Leander or Ada, but I had Dad back, and we had to rescue Ella, *now*.

Fists clenched, I hissed through gritted teeth, “We must get her out of that house.”

“I will.” Gently, he stroked my hair as he tried to push me down on the chair. “But I can’t imagine what you’ve been through the past weeks, not to mention how you ended up back here. You must be exhausted and distraught. Please rest while I go finish this.”

I clutched his arm urgently. “I’m coming with you. The last time I let you out of my sight, you vanished.” I paused, peering up at him, curiosity flaring up. “How did *you* end up here?”

For a split second, his eyes flit to the door. “I don’t know.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

He shook his head with a shrug. “Haven’t the foggiest.”

“Robin said he saw a fairy kidnap you!”

“Robin?” he repeated, confused. “Oh! The Scarlet boy’s friend, the one in the green hood who never let us get a good look at his face.”

“Yes, that one. He said a fairy plucked you outside the castle when you were driving the townspeople away. We assumed she took you to Faerie, and I’ve been worried sick about how I would get you back.”

“Well, here I am!” He spread both arms and smiled wide. “And I have you back home, safe and sound, and we’ll never have to leave again. Just sit tight while I go get Ella.”

There was something strange going on with him, like he’d become a different person.

It was odd enough, I fleetingly thought, if *he* was the changeling in this house.

Back in Rosemead, I’d found out that my name, Bonnibel, was that of a blue flower found only in Faerie, with the name frequently given to

changeling babies before they were swapped for human ones. I'd worried I was one, explaining so much about my size and my father's overprotectiveness.

But the way he was glossing over his abduction by a fairy and his inexplicable return, not to mention the nonchalant way he spoke of confronting those he now knew to be monsters, made me wonder—and worry.

I chewed my lip as I got up to peer intently into his face, looking for any differences. "Dad, we can't stay here. Once we get Ornella, those things will come after us."

He thumbed his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, you're right. They'll just show up and whisk her off like that woman who took Adelaide."

Unease sprung from the memory of how this whole mess started, with me pestering Adelaide about going through the Hornswoods and into Faerie. It was then that fairy woman saw us, and came after Ada. The woman opened a portal to whisk Ada away, but my father and I arrived just in time to get sucked in as well. Since she had no use for us, the fairy tossed us into Arbore, the very land I'd been dreaming of finding

Everything that had happened was because I'd been so desperate to leave this town, this island. I'd wanted to either go south and sail on the Forbidden Ocean to Arbore, or go north and off the map, into Faerie. I'd now reached one destination against my will, and been denied entering the latter by Leander.

Suppressing my guilt and frustration, I shook my head. "They'll come after us anyway, now that you've seen their truth. Even if they don't, I can't stay here. Ada is still in Faerie, and so are Leander and my friends, and I have to go find them."

That snapped him out of his weird distraction. "Bonnie, you just got back!"

"I didn't want to come back!" I blurted out, wincing when hurt flashed across his features. "I'm sorry, but it's the truth. I just wanted both of you back, but I never wanted to see this town again. I was pushed back here against my will."

"You're saying you would have stayed in that kingdom?"

I rolled my shoulders in a dismissive shrug. "I already told you back in the Woodbine lodge that I always wanted to leave, to travel. You weren't too happy about it."

“Of course, I wasn’t. I thought that you felt your life with me was so miserable you wanted to get away from me. What parent wants to hear that?”

“It was just that you never let me out of your sight. I wanted to get out, see things for myself, do things on my own. And now that I have, I never want to go back to the way it was before. But that’s beside the point. Now I need to go through the Hornswoods to rescue Ada and find Leander.”

He stared at me searchingly, like he had suddenly realized something. “I suppose you’ve always been drawn to those woods, as if you felt your destiny lay beyond them.”

That was the last thing I ever expected him to say.

I swallowed the lump of confusion and foreboding that suddenly expanded in my throat and rasped, “What do you mean?”

He huffed tiredly. “You always tried running into the woods when you were little. The Horned God’s statue kept everyone away, but not you. It’s why I had to keep such a close eye on you all these years.”

I didn’t remember that. But had I always been drawn there, as if I knew I didn’t belong here?

I really was a changeling, wasn’t I?

And my father must have suspected what I was. A fairy runt pitched across the border between realms, so they’d be rid of me and whatever problem I posed.

With all my heart, I hoped I was a foundling, rather than a changeling. And that Seamus and Belaina Fairborn’s real child wasn’t somewhere in Faerie now.

He exhaled raggedly, eyes heavy with a sadness I hadn’t seen since my mother died. “What will you do now?”

“First, we get Ella. Then we take her with us.”

His brows rose. “Us?”

I smiled at him, despite feeling bluer than Nexia’s grass. “I told you, I’m not giving you the chance to disappear again. I’m taking you with me —uh—if you want, that is.”

“If? You just said you’re not letting me out of your sight, and I won’t have you going back on your word.” He walked to the door and picked up his welding hammer, seeming more like himself than before. “You are so much like your mother was when I first met her, it’s amazing.”

I'd gotten used to the fact that he never talked about her. But for him to compare me to her, when I now suspected that I wasn't their daughter at all, made a surprised warmth spread through me. "I am?"

"Yes, you're as determined as she was," he said wistfully. "She did what she wanted, what she thought was right, no matter what anyone else had to say about it. I just wish she were here to see you."

I could barely remember how she looked, let alone what she was like. But if the one person who knew her best said I was just like her, I'd take that as a fact over any guess about my origins.

Reinvigorated, I grabbed the supplies I'd come for, dried fruits and meats, flasks of water, bandages, and two kitchen knives, and followed him out. I didn't spare the house a last glance as we ran up to our nearest neighbor, who was very surprised to see us back after being missing for weeks. We didn't give him a chance to ask us where we'd been, cornering him between us until he agreed to loan us his cart. With a fervent thank you, we shot up the road to the Dufreyne mansion.

Perched on a hill, behind the walls only Adelaide had been able to climb, the mansion looked deceptively peaceful. The main gates were locked, but no lock was a match for my father's hammer and with one swing we were bursting into the grounds. With every running step we got closer to the hair-raising noises coming from behind the main door.

With another swing of his hammer, we barged inside a grand foyer leading up to a spacious room suffocating in gilded furniture and the heat emanating from its stone-brick fireplace. Dolora was screeching at Ella, shaking her by the hair. Her daughters jeered, egging their mother on, while Ella screamed in pain and terror.

I was already rushing in to intervene when Dolora dragged Ella to the fireplace, forcing her face down towards the burning coals.

Weeks of pent-up anxiety and anger exploded out of me as I slammed into the stepsisters, knocking them down, while my father swung his hammer at Dolora, smashing her sideways before she could turn on him.

I screamed as Ella stumbled, then whimpered in relief when she caught herself before she fell into the fire. She swayed up on shaky legs to dash towards me, arms outstretched, reddened face drenched in tears. I held out my hands to her, the way I should have all those years ago when we'd both lost our mothers, when her father had remarried, when Ada had insisted on

helping her escape. But I'd always thought that, being helpless myself, I had nothing to offer her, and that she would refuse it if I had tried to help.

But this time, I could help. This time, she took my hand as I pulled her behind me, out of this nightmare.

One of the stepsisters blocked the front door, snarling, her eyes bulging and glowing red, her face turning green.

Weeks ago, that would have terrified me. Now I only lunged at her with the knife, ready to stab her for hurting Ella and threatening her life, and blocking our escape.

She dodged the knife with a howl, running back to hide behind her mother. It seemed even this horrid creature was all bark and no bite. No different than a schoolyard bully.

Behind us, my father swung his hammer wildly, keeping Dolora and the other stepsister back as he yelled at us, "Out!"

I burst out of the house, yanking Ella behind me as she stumbled and panted. He followed, slamming the doors shut, then smashing the handles.

That barely slowed them down. As soon as we got back into the cart, the stepfamily burst through the doors, fully shifting from horrid women to horrific creatures as they loped after us, startlingly fast, roaring unintelligible threats.

Still panting, Ella aimed terrified eyes behind us. "They'll catch up soon. There is no escaping them!"

My father spurred the horses with a shout. "We'll lose them."

"How?" she cried out.

I had no answer for her. But that was a good question. If they were something that came from across the woods, they'd have no problem chasing us through them. But whether that meant they'd catch up with us, or if we stumbled on something even worse, we had no option but to keep going.

My father took a back road down into town, full of twists and turns, but still couldn't shake them off. As he swung us onto the road leading to the woods, I saw Miss Etheline in the distance. Ada's former employer, the owner of the Poison Apple tavern, was standing on its steps, waving us off jovially. It was as if she'd been waiting for us.

My father turned to stare at her. As eccentric and absentminded as she was, I always thought that he liked her. Now there was a confused and conflicted expression on his face. This might be the last time he'd ever see

her, and he didn’t get the chance to say goodbye as we left her behind. I, too, wouldn’t get the chance to talk to her again, or ask her the dozen questions I’d always had for her.

She rapidly shrunk in the distance, still waving, her red hair and green skirt undulating in the breeze.

The cart jerked even more violently beneath us once we left the dirt road for the grass, wheels stumbling over mounds and dips in the earth, jolting us to a nauseating degree. But at least the tall grass proved to be a blessing, slowing down the stepfamily.

“Did you know?” I tore my eyes away from them, facing Ella. Still wide-eyed with terror, she just nodded. “Is this why you put up with them for so long, because they scared you?”

She shook her head, clear blue eyes glazing over in what looked like contemplation. “I think they had me under some sort of spell. I always felt I should escape and I didn’t know why I couldn’t. But the feeling of surfacing from a trance is so familiar, like this kept happening, and they kept bewitching me again. I might have started snapping out of it quicker than before. This time when the fog lifted, I didn’t wait until they put me under again and I ran.”

“So you were growing immune to their spells?”

“It would seem so. But this time, it didn’t seem she could entrance me again, and if you hadn’t come when you did, I- I think she was going to- to…” She swallowed, tears spilling down her cheeks, strawberry-blonde hair flying in the wind.

My own eyes burned as I squeezed her hand, trying to offer any comfort. She clung to mine until her breathing evened.

She finally looked away from her pursuing monsters to the path ahead, eyes widening when she recognized our surroundings. “Bonnie, where are we going?”

“I hope you don’t mind us taking you along on a trip,” my father called over his shoulder.

I held both her hands. “We can’t leave you behind, but we really must go. I have to warn you though, where we’re going, it might be dangerous—probably *is* dangerous—”

“I’ll go with you anywhere,” she interrupted, a mixture of trepidation and hope shaking her voice. “Anywhere will be safer than here, and anything will be better than what I’ve lived through all these years.”

Throat closing with tears, I dragged her into a hug. My father only nodded and turned to navigating our cart. He seemed to have no qualms about braving the woods, unlike everyone else in our town, who avoided going near them and even talked about them in utmost fear.

It was almost as if he knew where he was going. As if he'd done this before. It made the questions swirl about the change in him since our abduction, along with my theories of being a foundling and my suspicions about how much he knew that he wasn't telling me.

The woods loomed closer, and the towering figure of the Horned God grew more imposing, with its blank mask, branched antlers, curved claws, and visible ribcage. Now that I knew magic and curses existed, it was no longer just a statue to me, and I could see why Adelaide had been so scared of it. It was a bit different from its stained-glass depiction in the castle's dining room …

My breath hitched as the memory of my time there assailed me. I already missed that place, missed my meals with them—missed Leander—and it had only been a couple of hours.

But when I'd taken a look at the jar in my bag after I'd landed back here, the magical rose counting down his curse with its petals had already shown signs of more time passing for him. I dreaded taking another look now.

Drawing in a shuddering breath and closing my eyes, I tried to think of nothing but where I wanted to be, where I had to go to be with him. The one place I'd always wanted to go. The edge of the human world.

Beyond that, I had a chance of finding him, *if* we could pass through the Hornswoods.

As our cart plunged between the towering trees, the one thing that helped take my mind off the dangers that might meet or intercept us was the story of *Amadeus & Gratia*. The one Leander loved so much he had gifted me the book. I could suddenly see parallels between what Gratia had done for her husband, and what I was trying to do for Leander …

My thoughts scattered with my heartbeats as my eyes flew open to another violent lurch of the cart. I snatched a look behind us and found Aubenaire, the town I'd lived in all my life, receding. The monstrous stepfamily, living proof that life existed beyond Man's Reach, were still in pursuit. Before us, we had no genuine idea where we were heading or what awaited us there.

I looked ahead in time to see a glimmering ripple spreading out around us, transforming our surroundings in a mesmerizing display of hues and tapestries of light. Unlike the sudden transition that had taken us from the fairy path in the woods in Rosemead to Nexia, this looked as if the barrier between realms was dissolving.

We were really going where no human dared go. We were crossing Man’s Reach into Faerie.

CHAPTER TWO

To this moment, Faerie had been a concept, a fantasy.

It was the huge blank space on the map in *The Known World*, the book Ada had stolen for me from the Dufreyne mansion. It was also the glimpses I'd seen in Clancy's books, filled by cartographers' estimations and guesswork from old folktales. All accounts from Ericura said it lay beyond the Horned God and the barrier he guarded.

Now, as we plunged into that twilight realm that existed between worlds, I was starting to fear that it was really there—and that we wouldn't reach it.

What if one had to be a certain kind of being to be allowed to make the trip? In Nexia, the very island had refused to let Robin, Will, and me cross, allowing only Leander, Clancy, and Jessamine, who were now more beast than human. What if we exited the barrier, saw the shore of Faerie—only to be denied access? What if we were left for Ella's stepfamily to drag us back and stuff us up their chimney? Or worse, be punished for our transgression by letting us pass, only to sink our cart into the ocean? It had to be called the Forbidden Ocean for a reason, and maybe we'd find out why now.

It figured that the instant I finally took the leap into the unknown, I'd go from blind thirst for adventure to being crushed under breakers of doubt. And dubiousness was unbearable when one was a stickler for details like me.

My father, on the other hand, seemed unbothered as he maneuvered the galloping horses. Almost as if he knew where we were heading, despite the

path ahead being obscure. The eeriness of our surroundings was intensifying as the trees became silvery shadows that faded into the glimmering view, until it felt as if we were enveloped in a forest of ghosts.

A light tap on my arm startled me out of my swirling thoughts. Ella, stiff as a board, an apologetic crease between her slim brows, still had her hand reached out. To my horror, I hadn't noticed the singed skin of her palm, a burn from when she'd struggled to push her face away from the fire.

"This is probably too late to ask, but—where exactly are we going?"

I dragged my focus away from her inflamed skin, the rage I already felt towards the ogres lumbering after us tripling. "Off the edge of our world."

As if in response, our surroundings warped. Like a rock being thrown in a pond, the road ahead seemed to stretch and rebound with a force that shattered the view into a million shimmering pieces.

We were thrown from our seats as the cart jolted up, floating through the air for what felt like an instant and an eternity at the same time. Once we crashed back down to our seats, we were somewhere else entirely.

Heart clanging between my ears, eyes watering in the sudden brightness, I looked around, but found nothing but ocean and sand behind us. No sign of our island in the distance. No hint that it even existed.

I'd finally done it. After ages of fantasizing about going through the Hornswoods and seeing what lay beyond it, I had come out the other side.

I had left the Folkshore.

Chills shook my body as that fact sank in.

It had been one thing to wake up in Arbore, a situation I'd wanted, but ultimately had no say in. Willingly leaving the human world behind—for some reason, this scared me.

It clearly spooked Ella more. She ducked down into the leg-space of the cart, gripping the sides as she peeked over the edges, her blonde hair taking on an unnatural brightness in the harsh sun. "What's all this?"

I probably should have explained where we were taking her before hurtling through the forbidden barrier. Now all manner of eloquence eluded me. "Uh…sand?"

"I can see that!" Ella yelped. "Why is there so much of it?"

"Because it's a desert. No, sorry, it's a beach." I said in frantic rush. "Or can a desert end in a beach? I'm not sure, as I've never seen either."

“And this place is?”

The direct question finally made me find the relevant answer. “It’s Faerie. The Summer Court to be exact. At least I think it is. Hope it is. I’m not sure.”

Her pupils blew wide in spite of the harsh light as her breathing grew shallower.

I attempted an apologetic smile that came out as a cringe as I swept my eyes around. We were forging through golden dunes, kicking up billowing clouds of sand, obscuring her unrelenting stepfamily. The horizon was dominated by a pale mountain, and around us tall, skinny trees Leander and *The Known World* had dubbed palms swayed in a gentle breeze.

The palms got denser as we approached a small settlement with boxy, red-clay houses near a lake—an oasis? Unlike Nexia, where the inhabitants had hidden before turning the island on us, I saw people moving out and about, some watching us, but not seeming alarmed or hostile. I was taking that as a good sign for now. Along with crossing Man’s Reach without incident…

“Bonnie?”

Ella’s brittle call snapped my attention back to her. “Yes?”

“Why are we in Faerie?”

I winced at her hysterical shrillness. ‘To get back on track!’ would be the short answer. I was supposed to already be in Faerie with my friends, on our last-resort trip to seek out the Queen of the Spring Court and negotiate her lifting the curse she had inflicted on Leander and his castle’s staff. The curse that refused to break despite me doing everything it asked—from saying I loved him to displaying an act of love, when I placed myself between him and a distraught hunter bound on killing him. That was the official goal.

The other part was to find both my father, whom I’d found back home instead, and my best friend, whose location was more vague than the Spring Queen’s. From the glimpse I’d seen of her in the magic portal that had appeared in Leander’s library, she appeared to be in the Summer Court. Somewhere here, hopefully.

The last and least important reason for this trip was to get answers. Namely, why the Spring Queen had cursed Leander and his sister. The reason their parents had given didn’t seem plausible. And now, unless both

found someone specific to truly love them, he would continue devolving into a wolf-like monster, while Fairuza would succumb to eternal sleep at her eighteenth birthday. The answer I was personally seeking was whether or not I was a changeling.

The last bit I'd been keeping to myself. And it wasn't wise to share it with Ella now, who'd suffered enough from deceptive fairy creatures in her life.

Since I couldn't explain all of that now, I only said, "Many reasons actually, but mainly to catch up with friends of mine, and after that, to find Adelaide, who'd been kidnapped by a fairy."

"So, you know where we're heading?"

I attempted a shrug, ending with my tense shoulders hunched up. "Well…I think this is the Summer Court, and my friends should be here, somewhere."

A muscle feathered in her cheek. "Bonnie, do you or do you not know where we're going?"

Dad suddenly called out, "Now we do!"

He put the cart into a sharp turn that swung me into Ella at the bottom of the cart, going from a crumbling sandhill to a sand-dusted road leading down to a sprawling cityscape.

This *had* to be the Summer Court!

My heart galloped to the rhythm of the horses' hooves as I felt my adventurous excitement reawakening. It was nothing like the wet, dreary Aubenaire with its irregular layout, or like the verdant Rosemead with its grayscale houses all built concentrically along one big slope with a castle at its peak. This city was massive, flat, hot, and almost all of it could be seen from up here, like an endless canvas of vibrant colors and intricate designs.

My friends had to have already reached this place. All I had to do was find them and give Leander an earful for separating us, then we'd find Adelaide and move on to the next court, then the next, until we reached Spring.

The plan continued taking shape as we reached the grand entrance of the city's mosaic border wall. But as we passed into a dim tunnel ending in a populous town square, a sickening memory hit me.

The portal in Leander's library had shown me Adelaide and three other people, among them the fairy that had come to Etheline's tavern to lure

her to the woods. They'd been standing before the gates of a walled city, with a mountain soaring directly over it.

Where was that wall and that mountain?

Were we in the wrong place?

"Dad." I tugged at his collar, a chill biting into my bones despite the heat. "Dad, do you think this is it or could there be other cities?"

The instant he looked over his shoulder, I saw shapes appearing from both ends of the dark tunnel, silhouetted against the bright light—and they attacked.

Ella and I flew forward, harmonizing screams ripping from our throats as the horses came to a startled halt, the unspent momentum throwing Dad onto their backs. Lying winded in a mess of limbs allowed our obscure attackers to haul us off the cart without much resistance. I could only cling to my bag, protecting the rose jar as they dragged us on the ground out of the tunnel and back towards broad daylight.

The three men holding my father and Ella had dark, curly hair, pointed ears, golden eyes, and deeply bronzed skin. They wore yellow, flowing, sleeveless coats over bare chests and white, loose pants, with leather sashes that held curved swords with ornate hilts.

"Look what we have here. More tourists from across the sea. What shall we do with this bunch?" The one who held me tutted. It was only then I looked up and saw that he had different features and complexion to the rest—olive-skinned, with long, wavy, ruddy hair. He had his grey eyes trained on my father, a slow, sly grin spreading across his face, then his gaze dropped to me and he did a double take, frowning slightly. "Not as curious as our last trio, but intriguing, nonetheless."

He knew. He knew I was a fairy, even if I didn't look it. Why else would he look surprised?

I struggled uselessly, while my father fought blindly and Ella—

Ella turned into a wild animal.

She kicked and screamed madly, forcing her captor to restrain her by pinning her arms to her sides. But her thrashing became so violent she loosened his grip and almost forced him to let go when she bit his wrist hard, drawing blood.

I stopped my own struggles to gape at her. Had she always been capable of such ferocity? Was this what she'd done every time Dolora's subduing spells faded?

No matter how futile her previous bids for escape had been, she didn't relent this time. She snapped her jaws at the restraining arms, teeth sinking in every inch of flesh she could reach. But it was when she jabbed her elbows back into his gut with a curdling scream that he finally let go with a grunt. As one of Dad's captors rushed to help his comrade recapture her, she barreled at his legs, knocking him down and scrambled towards me. That provided enough distraction for my father to slam his head back into his remaining captor's face and throw him over his shoulder.

They both sprang for me, but the fairy holding me didn't give them or me the chance to do anything as he bent his knees and sprang up. Only this wasn't a mere hop that ended with him out of their reach, but a jump that had us flying so high up I saw every rooftop in this square!

Nausea swamped my head and cascaded down my body, reminding me of the sheer terror and helplessness when I'd fallen off the side of the castle mid-escape attempt. I'd been flown back up by Jessamine, but this man had no wings, and he started descending as fast and hard as he'd risen. Gravity sank its hooks into my guts, jostling and knotting them as we dropped, hardening my very marrow as it braced for the crash.

We landed, not before my father, but on a roof. The screaming tension in my bones scattered to the winds when, instead of a jarring impact, my fairy captor touched down lightly, without a stumble or a loosened grip. Before I could gather my wits to attempt an escape, he repositioned me over his shoulder like a sack and sprinted. The roof ducked out from beneath us as we were once again airborne.

I left my shriek far behind as he landed on an opposing roof, not breaking his pace as he continued hurtling ahead. As he leaped onto another roof ,then another, I decided any bid for freedom would end with my head cracking on the street like an egg. At the moment, clinging to him was my best bet for survival.

It was clear he knew that, since he was no longer holding me, leaving me to grip his clothes with all my strength to remain on his back. Between heart-bursting jumps, I snatched glances back at the street below, and saw Dad and Ella running after us with the guards pursuing them.

With a leap off the last roof, we landed back on the ground, and my urge to vomit had tripled. He zigzagged through the maze-like city, leaving those pursuing us and the marketplace in the dust.

When I had finally grown accustomed to his dizzying speed and my overwhelming nausea, I had to ask, “Where are you taking me?”

“To where they keep their other trespassers and oddities,” he hummed, amused, not even panting. “Don’t worry, your friends will catch up. They won’t leave without their smallest.”

“Couldn’t you just take us all in one go?”

“We tried, and you all made a fuss, so making them follow us is easier—and more fun,” he said with a devilish grin, reminding me of Leander’s devious friend Robin, who had played a similar trick on me. He’d taken my father, knowing I’d follow him to the castle. And I had. It was how all this had started.

I swung a glance behind us, and to my growing surprise, I spotted Ella catching up with us. He only took a sharp turn and sprinted up knee-high steps leading up to towering, ornately carved gates.

At our approach, the gates swung open revealing what they guarded. An enormous, elaborate, breathtaking palace.

As he zoomed towards it with me hanging off him like a rag doll, it grew even more mind-boggling. It seemed it was carved from a single, gigantic pearl.

I didn’t get to a chance to notice any details as he hurtled through open doors on its far left end. He moved so fast I kept leaving my gasps behind as he flew into halls and down staircases, jumping whole flights until he reached a curved hallway bordered by cell doors.

After that nerve-wracking display of inhuman grace and speed, I’d had enough. The disorientation, and whatever defiance managed to pierce through it, emerged in a burp of vomit that spilled down his back.

There, that’ll show him.

With a grunt of disgust, he wrenched open the first door and set me down, nose wrinkled and mouth twisted. “I’ll be back with your humans. In the meantime, try not to upset your new cellmate.”

He closed the door and left, chuckling. I turned, back against the bars, my world swaying, and the heat of bile still crawling up my throat.

At the end of the cell, something rose to cover me in its massive shadow.

My legs shook, knees knocking together, but I was ready to follow Ella’s lead, to kick and claw and bite mouthfuls, even spew whatever vomit flew up to my mouth again.

The looming figure cocked its head at me. “Bonnie?”

I froze, air caught in my lungs as Leander stepped into the cellblock’s dim lighting.

Swooping down, he pulled me into a hug.

Relief had no chance to chase shock away in my tense body before he pulled back to search my face, bafflement creeping onto his face. “What are you doing here? How did you get here? I sent you home!”

At a loss for words, I just reached a trembling hand up. He obliged, bending down so I could run my hands over his bearded face.

Assured that this was him and not a dream, I pulled him further down by his shirt, bringing us nose to nose so I could look deep into his eyes—and bring my fist down on his head.

“YOU JERK!”

CHAPTER THREE

"How dare you!" I seethed, pounding my fists on his chest as he stumbled away from me. "What in the world were you thinking throwing me through that portal?"

"I saw your father through it, entering your stone house!" Leander caught my wrists, stalling me with frustratingly little effort. "I had to send you back to him."

"Why?"

"Why?" he scoffed. "It was all you wanted for as long as I've known you, to get back to your father. I had my chance to reunite you in your home at last, and to spare you from the wrath of Nexia."

"That wasn't your choice to make!"

"But I knew if I'd left it up to you, you would have stayed with me at the price of letting yourself be harmed—and I couldn't bear that!" he blurted out, running his hands over his face.

They seemed a bit bigger than I remembered, bonier, hairier. When had that happened? How long had it been for him?

Breathing out, he schooled his features, reached for me again. "How did you get here?"

"That's a bit of a long story. It took me hours to catch up with you."

"Hours?" A startled voice rose from the cell next to us. "Time here really does work differently than it does on our side then."

I tore myself from Leander's gentle hold, threw myself at the bars. I didn't need to crush my head between the bars to see Clancy's horns sticking out from his own set.

“Miss Fairborn, hello!” He stuck out an arm, waving. “Nice to see you still don’t take no for an answer.”

“You bet I don’t!”

“Let’s not dub your stubbornness a virtue just yet,” Leander grouched, coming to stand over me so his shadow spilled out onto the dimly lit hallway. “All your following us has achieved is getting you locked up with me, again.”

“And what would have sending me back to Aubenaire achieved?” I asked, still cranky. “Me being locked up in my house, again.”

“I thought you’d had enough of being stuck with me.”

I elbowed him. “Is that why you couldn’t get rid of me fast enough?”

“Well, you are a bit of a handful.”

I eyed his huge hands again, before smirking up at him. “By whose standards? Yours?”

His defensive splutter earned a laugh from Clancy. “I must say I missed your conversations. If we ever undo all of this, I should chronicle your interactions in a play. It would tickle audiences everywhere.”

“What would you call it?”

“*The Lemming*” Leander suggested in feigned humor. “Or, *The Girl Who Leapt Before She Looked: A Tragedy.”*

That earned him another elbow to the gut. “More like *Fuel to the Flames: A Guide to Self-Sabotage by Lord Rosemead*—right, Jessamine?”

There was no response.

“Jessie?”

“She’s not with us,” Clancy said, his voice suddenly strained and small. “She flew away before they could get her.”

Unable to decide whether that was good or bad news, I stepped back, hands suddenly clammy, wondering if my father and Ella had evaded capture. “How did they get you, anyway?”

Leander worked his jaw. “Nets.”

“Nets?”

“Bronze nets,” he clarified, clearly chagrined.

“Couldn’t you have just—” I clawed my fingers and mimicked a slashing swipe.

“Bronze, *magic* nets,” he elaborated.“How did they get you?”

With embarrassing ease, which was an answer I was not validating his reprimands with.

I chose a vague account, sticking to the facts. “Dad, my friend, and I were coming here to catch up with you when these guards attacked and one decided to lead them on a chase, and here I am.”

His eyes widened. “Your father joined you? And a friend? What friend?”

“That one, I assume,” Clancy interrupted, bringing our attention to the redheaded man, who’d returned with the exhausted Dad and Ella in tow.

A conflicting mixture of relief and regret flared within me. I was happy I hadn’t lost them, but I hated that they’d ended up trapped here because of me.

Come to think of it, none of us would be here if it weren’t for my harebrained ideas.

“Making friends already?” the man taunted, looking over at Leander and me. “I thought it was only fair if I gave the satyr his own friend as well.” He ripped open the cell door next to us, I could hear Clancy’s hooves as he rushed ahead. His bid for freedom was ended by the man tossing Ella at him. They slammed into each other with a sharp shout and a startled bleat, and hit the floor with a painful-sounding crash.

My dad’s sigh of relief upon entering our cell was swallowed by Ella’s blood-curdling scream, following by Clancy’s soothing tones. “I mean you no harm, I swear it.”

“Get away from me!” she screeched, with a shaky voice.

“Miss, I know I may look like a goat but I assure you I am a—ow!” Clancy yelped.

Dad’s hug turned into a protective squeeze when he heard Leander speak. “What happened?”

“She hit me with her shoe!” Clancy said, scandalized. “Her shoe, Leander! My own governess never whacked me this hard!”

Our captor burst into a fit of giggles, earning a threatening, wolfish snarl from Leander, “Shut up, Alan.”

Leander was on first-name basis with our captor already? And what kind of name for a fairy was Alan, anyway?

Alan the fairy just laughed harder, wiping tears from his eyes. “Oh, come on, Fang Face, tell me you don’t find this funny.”

Dad finally spoke up. “What did you put her with?”

“A satyr!” Ella yelled, frantic. “It’s going to run me through with its horns!”

Clancy let out a horrified bleat. “I would never do such a thing! And I’m not an ‘it’!”

“He’s telling the truth, Ella,” I assured her. “Lord Gestum is a friend of mine, and he wouldn’t harm a fly.”

“Lord? Lord of what? Are you a servant of the Horned God?” Clancy’s protests fell on deaf ears as she only grew more terrified. “You’re one of those things that come through the Hornswoods, just like Dolora! I finally get away from her, and I end up with you. What did I ever do in my life to deserve this?”

“Miss, please put the shoe down,” Clancy begged, sounding strained. “Put the shoe down—or I’ll eat it!”

That bizarre threat seemed to finally stun her silent.

“Thank you.” He cleared his throat. “Now, I’m not actually a satyr, just cursed to look like one, and I’ve never met the Horned God, and hope I never do. Does that soothe your fears?”

Ella let out an indignant “NO!” and I heard her other shoe collide into Clancy’s head, ripping another pained yelp from him.

Avoiding eye contact with my father, Leander loudly said, “Miss, if he wanted to assault you he would have done so already, especially after you gave him the first beating of his life.”

“This isn’t funny, Leo,” Clancy said. “Since I’ve been cursed, I’ve munched on napkins and bitten the prongs off a few forks, but this is the most humiliated I’ve ever felt.”

Leander huffed. “Be happy it was just a shoe. You could have been attacked with an axe or a hayfork.”

“Last I remember, you earned the bit with the hayfork,” Clancy retorted.

“Boys,” I interrupted, still being squished by my father. “We can discuss who’s had it rougher later. Now we need to figure out a way out of here.”

“No need,” said Alan, bending down to meet my eyes. “You’ll be out soon.”

Surprise was quickly replaced by suspicion as I eyed his devilish grin. “What was the point of stuffing us in here if you’re letting us go?”

“I never said I was letting you go, just out.” And with that, Alan left, whistling joyously.

Leander muttered a derisive “Fairies,” under his breath. Then keeping his head angled down as to avoid my father’s eyes he said, “Nice to see you again, Mr. Fairborn.”

“Is it?” My father said tersely. “Last we met, you had thrown me into a cell. This time we’re sharing one, so I wouldn’t call that an improvement.”

The only times I’d heard him this stiff and unfriendly was when he’d dealt with Ella’s stepmother—before she ‘outed’ herself as a monster. “Dad.”

Leander harrumphed. “Imprisoning you brought me no joy.”

“But imprisoning my daughter did.”

“Dad!”

Leander winced. “I regret the way we met, but you did steal a rose from my tree.”

“And that was worth a prison sentence?”

“Yes, considering you essentially ripped a month from the limited time everyone in my castle had left, thanks to the curse.”

Dad’s hold on me loosened with shock. “I thought it was just any old magic tree.”

Leander sighed. “Think of it as more of an hourglass, with petals instead of sand grains.”

The jar in my bag suddenly felt very heavy as I remembered crushing that very rose my father had plucked, decimating the number left on the tree from over a dozen roses to just three.

And I hadn’t asked yet why he’d done such a thing. “Dad? Why did you take that rose?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, all foreign hostility falling into familiar sheepishness. “After I woke up at the castle grounds, I spotted that peculiar tree and pegged it as a fairy growth. I thought it might work like their enchanted mushrooms to transport us back home.”

“I see.” Leander deflated a little, as if whatever resentment he’d held towards my father had evaporated. “I suppose I can’t blame you too much for the chaos your action unleashed.”

Dad exhaled heavily. “Nor I you, it seems.”

Leander seemed satisfied with that answer. But I wasn’t.

To leave Arbore, Leander and I had taken a fairy path in the woods in Rosemead to get to Nexia. We’d just taken another in the Hornswoods.

Both times, I hadn’t been certain of their use, and I hadn’t even known of them until Castor Woodbine accidentally led us onto one.

How did my father not only know about fairy flora, but had been unfazed at going through the Hornswoods? Why had he readily accepted Rosemead Castle’s inhabitants as people and Ella’s stepfamily as monsters?

“Dad,” I began, mouth dry, throat tight, but unable to let this slide any further. “When was the first time you met a fairy creature?”

His eyes fell shut with a long, defeated sigh. “When I was your age. When your uncle and I went through the woods and ended up here.”

CHAPTER FOUR

I gaped at my father. Everything from the Folkshore's existence, to the Beast being a cursed prince, to my probable status as a changeling—all seemed normal in comparison to this revelation.

My entire life, Seamus Fairborn was my absentminded father, a man content with the simple things in his small-town life, never seeing the point in all my questions or my desire to seek out their answers. The only thing he couldn't bear not knowing was my whereabouts, and the only thing he took with extreme seriousness was ensuring that I was kept away from all possible dangers; suffocating me with rules and restrictions so he could maintain his peace of mind, probably thinking he'd succeed in imparting that to me as well.

That was why he'd only ever said that his brother Ossian had disappeared. I'd always thought that was a nicer way of saying "He died," something he hadn't been able to avoid when my mother passed away in their bedroom.

Now my father had confessed they'd gone through the Hornswoods, so maybe Ossian really had disappeared. Gone into the uncharted territory that was Faerie, never to return.

The implications simmered until they reached a boiling point and I couldn't help snapping, "You've been lying to me my entire life! About my uncle, and the Hornswoods, and everything you know about magic and fairies." I grabbed his arms to keep him from avoiding my eyes, face burning. "And about what else? This can't be the end of it. There's a lot more you're not telling me and I need to know all of it now!"

He sighed heavily. “I wouldn’t consider it lying, when you didn’t ask me outright about any of this.”

“None of my questions over the years warranted a ‘*by the way, your uncle was lost in Fairyland*’?” I threw my arms in Leander’s direction. “Did you know Arbore existed?”

After a wild-eyed pause, he finally breathed out a tight, “Yes.”

Unbelievable! My own father, unlike everyone in Ericura, had always known about our ancestral homeland—and no doubt the rest of the Folkshore—and had refused to tell me about it! Not just that, but when we’d awoken in the Woodbine hunting lodge after the fairy had transported us to Rosemead, he’d continued playing dumb!

“How could you not tell me such crucial things? When I asked you about it all in every way possible?” I stopped, my voice cracking over the thought of how much I didn’t know.

All I really knew about my own mother was that her effigy was based on the Field Queen—what Ericurans had dubbed the fertility goddess, whose name they’d long forgotten. Far away in Arbore, I’d found her statue in the town circle beneath Leander’s castle. She was Rosmerta, their patron goddess, and likely namesake of Rosemead.

I had hoped to find my namesake in the Folkshore too, the bonnibel Miss Etheline had told me was a blue flower. But I’d found out it was only found in Faerie, its name mostly given to changelings. That had been my first clue that I was one.

But did that theory still have weight? Now I knew my father had been to Faerie and back? But even if he’d happened upon a bonnibel here, and thought it a great name for a daughter, he’d told me he’d wanted to name me after his mother. If I hadn’t been named by whatever fairy had swapped me for baby Fionnoula Fairborn, then who had…?

A heavy hand dropped on my shoulder, pulling me back to our dark, dusty cell. “Miss Fairborn?”

I hadn’t noticed Leander move closer, like he was coming between me and my father. That was when I realized I looked as if I was about to pounce on my father and wring answers from him by the suspenders.

Dragging my glare from my father, I muttered, “Back to ‘Miss Fairborn’ already?”

Judging by the guilt aiming his eyes at the floor, Leander hadn’t forgotten his farewell to me, the first time he’d called me *Bonnie*.

And he’d kissed me then. On the forehead, but he’d kissed me.

“Were you ever anything else?” he mumbled.

The rage towards my father’s secretive existence simmered to irritation towards Leander. “What are you trying to do here? Put more distance between us than you did when you pushed me through that portal?”

The hair on his nape rose as he hunched defensively, looking ever more the wolf-man he’d been transformed into. “I already said I did what I had to do, to keep you safe!”

I pointed between them. “I’ve had it with both of you trying to shelter me from dangers, imagined or otherwise! Whether you like it or not, I’m here, and whatever comes now is not avoidable.”

“You’re right!” Alan had returned, swaggering down our cellblock, spinning a ring of keys around a forefinger, wiggling his eyebrows at Clancy. “Hello again, Mr. Shaggybreeches.” He pointed at Ella in her coal-blackened dress. “Has Cinders here given you another wallop?”

“What do you want now?” Clancy groaned. “Come to throw someone else in with us?”

Alan snorted, opening Clancy and Ella’s cell. “Actually, I’m here to let you out.”

“You just threw us in here. What was the point?” I asked him.

Holding our door open, Alan said, “Actually, you’ve been here a night.”

What?

I slowly exited, eyeing him, confused. “A whole night?”

“’Tis a brand new day.” he confirmed with a nod. “Annoying isn’t it? Summer days crawl while the nights fly.” Alan’s grey eyes followed my father as he joined our line last, his amusement growing. “Where has the time gone, right?”

Ella flattened herself against the wall beside me, fearful eyes focused on Leander. She grabbed my arm, her whisper hoarse with unadulterated horror. “What. Is. That?”

Leander’s angular ears twitched, hearing her loud and clear as he pointedly faced the other way.

“He’s actually a prince,” I said with a soothing smile.

“Lord Satyr and Prince Werewolf?” she choked. “What’s next? Father Frost crawling down the next chimney I’m shoved into?”

Alan whooped with laughter, earning him another rumbling snarl from Leander, which made Ella shake and press herself further against the wall, like she wanted to become one with the stone.

Clancy clomped closer, his hooves echoing off the stone walls with cringe-inducing clarity. “Is your friend all right?”

Ella only threw an arm across my shoulders, pulling me into a protective squeeze. He stepped away, hands raised, hurt flashing in his blue eyes. They were smaller than I remembered, slowly melting into a goatish squint.

Sadness resurfaced inside me, dominating all other feelings. It wasn’t that long ago when I’d viewed both Leander and Clancy with the same fear and suspicion. But I’d grown so accustomed to their states that I no longer found them scary or repulsive.

Now the hunch that bowed Leander’s posture and the malformation of his legs flooded me with intense sympathy. And worry, about how much time they all had left before turning into complete beasts.

I softly stroked the arm holding me back in a well-meaning chokehold, feeling Ella shake behind me. “They won’t hurt you, I promise.”

She shook her head vigorously. “I won’t believe any part of Faerie means us no harm.”

“I don’t know about Faerie and its inhabitants, but Clancy and Leander aren’t fairies. They’re not like Dolora and her daughters, I swear it.”

She pressed her lips stubbornly. “Forgive me if I don’t want to take my chances after being at Dolora’s mercy for years.”

“Don’t you trust me? Trust my experience with them, at least?”

“I trusted my father’s experience with his new wife, and look what happened.”

I had nothing to say to that. It didn’t matter if I knew my friends’ goodness to be true. I couldn’t ignore Ella’s ordeal and push her to share my outlook.

She inched back, dragging me along with her to put more distance between us and Alan.

He only tossed a glance back at her. “Really, pumpkin, if you think you can outrun me after yesterday, then you’ve breathed way too much smoke in your life.” He cocked his head at her curiously. “Seriously, did you sleep in a fireplace? You smell like soot.”

She tensed behind me, resentful rather than fearful, all but arching her back and hissing at Alan. I had a feeling that if she were a resident of Rosemead Castle when the curse had hit, she'd have become a giant cat.

Waving, I regained his attention. "If you intended to set us free come morning, then what was the point of all this?"

With a snap of his fingers the handcuffs my father and Ella had first arrived in manifested on all our wrists in puffs of grey smoke. "Again, who said I was setting you free?"

Our reactions ranged from shock to disbelief to outrage, the latter exemplified by Leander charging Alan, only to be evaded by a graceful spin of the fairy's heels.

Leander's attack made Ella leap back with a screech, nearly choking me with the chain between her now-bound hands. I bumped him with my shoulder, frantically gesturing. He immediately stopped, settling for baring his fangs at Alan. A part of me wondered if that was an expression he'd made when he'd been human, and what it would have looked like.

But I would never find out if we didn't get out of here and find the Spring Court fast.

I raised my hands to the fairy. "Do you really need to bind us?"

He grinned. "Alas, I do. To make sure none of you go wherever bird-girl went. The king would hate for another player to go missing before the games even start."

A wet chill settled over me, as if I wasn't in Summer itself, but in the dead of autumn. "Games? What games?"

His response was to make another gesture, and a new chain linking us all together ended in his grip. He skipped ahead, pulling us all up after him and out into the blinding sun.

In the moments I could see nothing, I was buffeted by rolling thunder. Then my vision returned to a mesmerizing, yet terrifying, sight.

As high as I could see, we were encircled by rows upon rows of chanting fey.

I gazed back at Alan, eyes and mouth gaping wide, and he threw his head back, laughing heartily. "Oh, didn't I tell you? The usual punishment for trespassing on Summer territory is to be chucked into the ocean. But today you've lucked out. You'll instead be our players in the Equinox Games!"

CHAPTER FIVE

A drowning wave of cheers and shouts inundated us as we were dragged deeper onto the colosseum floor. The whole structure didn't seem built, but carved out of the bowels of what appeared to be a dormant, red-rock volcano. The rows of stone seats extruded up, towering above us, raging with a sea of colorful spectators.

We struggled, but it felt as if an invisible force herded us, until we were lined up on a half-moon stage. Beneath its edge, a massive pool swallowed most of the sprawling ground. Its pale green water wrinkled into shimmering pleats, with frothing waves lapping at our feet.

On the far end of the pool, a mounted platform in the center of the spectator seats soared, bearing four magnificent thrones. For the kings and queens of the Faerie Courts?

One resplendent figure in golden robes and a crown, probably the King of Summer, stood from one of the middle thrones.

His booming voice overpowered the din of the crowds and the pounding in my head. "Welcome, one and all, to our annual Equinox Games, where each Court devises its own perilous challenge to test the volunteers picked from our prisons—willing or otherwise."

Though I couldn't see the man's face, from his voice, I could tell he was grinning merrily at the prospect of us meeting disastrous ends during their game. A game we couldn't opt out of.

Leander huffed in frustration next to me as he tried to wrench his wrists apart. But like the magical nets that had snared him, the shackles refused to budge under any amount of force. Ella still tried to run away,

but our combined weight wrenched her chains and smacked her down on the platform.

Clancy wasn't struggling or joining me in search for an escape route. Instead, his eyes were on the sky, squinting against the harsh sunlight. Was he hoping Jessamine would show up?

I was, too—to make sure she was unharmed. But if she was, I wished for her to remain free, something she had never been, back in Arbore.

"The rules are simple," the King of Summer continued. "Whoever makes it out of all four trials alive, wins a magical gift from any of the attending monarchs."

That regained my attention in a snap that almost pulled a muscle in my neck.

"A gift," Leander breathed, ceasing his fruitless struggles with his bindings. "Do you think…?"

"…that we can ask the Spring Queen to lift the curse?" I finished for him.

"And whoever fails…" continued the King, his abnormally loud voice drowning out ours, the smile staining it getting wider, "…well, that means you met your end in the obstacles. So, to all players—I wish you the best of luck!"

At his last word, a cannon blasted and our bindings went up in smoke. I didn't have time to think another thought, to confer with Leander about what we'd do, or to check for my father or Ella. The instant we were unbound, the platform retreated from beneath our feet.

Whatever courage the prospect of finding the Spring Queen here instead of her faraway Court had afforded me, deserted me, along with solid ground. I hit the now-angry waves beneath with a painful splash. My scream was drowned out by the overwhelming rush of saltwater that engulfed me and burned down my throat.

Unable to open my eyes, to cough, or breathe, I floated for a moment in cold, total darkness. Then I began to sink. Primal terror fired my every nerve, forcing me to flail, to expend my breath and strength as I continued to sink.

The only water I'd ever known had been in my tub back home, or the duck pond I'd stuck my legs into. This was a seemingly bottomless abyss of roiling water and—and—

I couldn't swim!

Because my father wouldn’t let me do anything, try anything. Now I was thrashing uselessly, running out of air and getting further and further away from the surface.

I was going to meet my end here, now. In a minute, I’d drown.

I’d die without having ever truly lived.

I’d die without helping save anyone.

But maybe without me, their weakest link, without having me to worry about and slow them down, they’d survive these challenges. Then they’d have a chance to achieve their salvation.

That conviction was the one thing that brought me peace as I surrendered to the pointlessness of my fate.

But just before I let out my last reserves of life, something moved in the water.

From the way it moved the water around me, in shockwaves that pushed me backwards, it couldn’t be a person. I had to know what it was, no matter how badly my eyes burned.

My eyelids flew apart only to find myself facing the opening jaws of a giant serpentine creature. I screamed, letting the last of my air out as water rushed into my mouth.

It spearheaded towards me, its maw widening enough to gobble me up whole. I couldn’t even close my eyes as I watched my zooming end in horror. It was only feet away when something slammed into its side, throwing it off course.

I heard its screech vibrate through the water as an arm hooked around my waist, lifting me up and away too fast to find out what happened to the monster’s attacker.

My head broke through the surface, forcing out the suffocating water in retching coughs, and in the deepest breath of my life. Feeling air rush past my constricted throat and into my strained lungs had tears of relief flooding my burning eyes.

“Bonnie, are you all right?” my father panted, squeezing me to his side.

Turning, I clung to him like I had as a scared child during thunderstorms, sobbing almost as hard as I had when I’d finally understood why my mother was never coming home.

His legs remained in constant motion, but he hugged me back, stroking my wet hair and shushing me soothingly. “I got you, it’s all right now.”

“No, it’s not!” I still coughed saltwater and spluttered, disoriented, terrified—and furious. “I don’t even know how to stay afloat. What girl my age is this useless?”

“You’re not useless,” he argued. “No one expects to be thrown into such a situation.”

“Dad, we lived on an island! I should have encountered water at some point. And I *am* useless because you wouldn’t let me do anything useful, and you still haven’t explained why!”

“I know you’re upset right now, but I wasn’t the strictest parent around…”

Ella splashed past us, interrupting our untimely argument, screaming, “GIANT EEL!”

I didn’t need to ask what that was. The creature from the depths shot up from the waves, eliciting a deafening mass of awed sounds from the audience and horrified screeches from the rest of us in the water.

It turned its red eyes on us, its smooth black skin glistening, its head blocking out the sun.

Dad bobbed sideways, kicking hard, propelling us after Ella towards the pool’s edge. But swimming with one arm, his pace wasn’t fast enough. The monster was gaining on us.

Sick with desperation, I knew there was no way we’d escape it in time. I was only slowing him down.

Pushing at his shoulders, I begged, “Dad—*let go.*”

Still focused ahead, he loosened his grip on me. “Hold onto my back then. It’ll be easier to swim with both arms.”

“No, let *me* go. I’m weighing you down.”

“Weigh me down?” he scoffed, continuing to trudge ahead. “You do feel heavier—it must be your soaked clothes—still not nearly as heavy as what I’m used to lugging around at my job.”

“You don’t work in bottomless water,” I wheezed, pushing against him to no avail. “And certainly not while being chased by a sea serpent.”

The serpent in mention shot after us, splitting the waves like the runaway train Adelaide had once told me about. The glimpse of it from over my shoulder made my heart lodge in my throat. It didn’t matter how hard I kicked along with my father, we weren’t going to escape it.

Swishing closer, it slowly bared horrifying rows of long, sharp, metallic teeth that gleamed like a thousand daggers. It widened its jaws,

ready to snap them over us, plunge them into our flesh and pierce us to pieces. The cheering of the crowds grew thunderous as it reared back—and its screech ripped the humid air.

Something was scrambling up its back! The moment it jumped on its head, making it sway and thrash in an attempt to throw it off, I saw what it was—*who* it was. *Leander!*

The audience's collective gasps echoed through the colosseum like a tornado.

Drenched, hair fully off his face, displaying the extent of his transformation, Leander bared teeth that might belong to much smaller jaws, but were no less scary than the serpent's. He looked totally feral as he sank his claws into its scaly hide, dragging them viciously, shredding out rippling piles of sooty flesh.

In its agony, the serpent forgot about us, focusing only on throwing Leander off. The rush of relief that had washed out my terror drained as the dread I'd felt for us transferred to him.

He continued inflicting as much damage on it as possible, giving my father the chance to put more distance between us. He dug his claws deeper into its flesh to hang on as it began to thrash violently, creating intensifying waves that swept us further away.

Clancy had reached the end of the pool first, and was trying to pull Ella out, all the while yelling at Leander. I couldn't tell if he was encouraging him or yelling for him to let go. All I could hear over the roar of the crowd and my shearing breathing were the frenzied screeches of the serpent as its lurching waned, until it ended with an earth-shaking plummet into the pool.

Its gargantuan mass hit the water with the force of a storm, creating a massive breaker that tossed us to the edge with a slam, spewing the roiling water to drench Ella and Clancy.

Both pounced to help us up and out, and Ella crashed to her knees and pulled me blindly into a shuddering hug.

"What is this place?" she gasped, squishing me against her, our drenched bodies and clothes squelching against each another. "What is wrong with these people?"

"This is evidently how fairies have fun," Clancy gritted, scouting anxiously for Leander who'd disappeared in the waters now blackening with the serpent's blood. "Among kidnapping travelers and cursing babies,

forcing people to nearly drown, or to get eaten by pet sea monsters for their entertainment sounds about right."

Feeling my lungs tearing inside my chest, I struggled to breathe, to get up on hands and knees, frantically looking for Leander.

I heard the grimace in my father voice as he panted, "Last I was here, there was a party that lasted three days. The goal was to dance until you passed out—or worse. The humans involved rarely left such events in one piece."

"Depraved things. I hope whoever found Dolora made her dance on hot coals," Ella spat as she helped me up to my feet. She then pulled back a little and frowned at me.

My head was still spinning and I was having a hard time focusing. It was as if everything was warped, inside and out. It must be why the distance between my head and hers felt less than before.

"Did you shrink in that water?" I mumbled as I stumbled back to the edge, worry for Leander increasing tenfold, eating through my already tattered nerves. Where *was* he?

Had the serpent taken him down with it? What if he was exhausted or injured, or even knocked out beneath the waves, further sinking to the bottom?

"I was about to ask if you got tal—ah!" Ella leapt back, dragging me along, just as something huge and soaked shot out of the water and landed on all fours before us.

Leander shook his entire body like a wet dog, splattering water everywhere before straightening up. "Does—" A seizure of barking coughs interrupted him, until he finally wheezed, "Does this count as slaying a dragon? Am I eligible for knighthood now?"

"You'll need to live long enough to return to your father and ask him for it." Clancy clapped him on the back, tone chastising, but eyes full of anxiety mixed with relief. "And to do that, you need not to court death."

"You're welcome to do all the hard work in the next challenge." Leander pushed hair that was more fur now off his eyes, before reaching for me. I eagerly met him halfway, hands raised to pat around his face, checking for injuries. "Are you going to hit me again?" he joked softly, his deep voice now rougher.

Brimming with gratitude and affection, I cared nothing for Ella's gasp and my father's hiss as Leander reached a clawed hand to my face. I didn't

even consider worrying about nails so sharp, with blue-black blood stuck underneath them, coming so near my eyes. It had been a while since I'd been the least bit fazed by anything about him.

"You saved me, again," I said breathlessly, remembering the time he'd almost died fighting off redcaps to rescue me. "I'll have to return the favor—again. If we pass the next three trials."

"We will," he said, an unknown fire burning in his turquoise eyes, the high of killing that serpent and saving everyone, not just me.

It was like the ordeal had burnt away his habitual moroseness and pessimism, had brought out the warrior prince he was supposed to be. It was the first time I felt nothing but determination from him. And even in our dire situation, it lifted my spirits.

"Once we do, let's hope they won't give us more hoops to jump through until we speak with the queen." He gently tucked a clump of wet locks behind my ear. "I've had enough of fairies and their vicious… tricks…"

He suddenly retreated with a lurch, removing his hand from my face as if it burned him. His pupils blew wide, rendering his blue-green irises a thin ring, making space for the panic and revulsion that flooded his eyes.

My heart hammered painfully as I tossed a glance behind me. Finding nothing to warrant his reaction, only noting a strange lull in the din of our audience, I staggered back to him, rasping, "What is it?"

I found his back hunched in a hostile arch, lips curling up in a defensive snarl. "Who are you? Where is Bonnie?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?" I reached out a hand and he only snapped his jaws at me.

Shaking with confusion and fright, I stumbled back, my gaze swinging around, asking for the others' help.

I found Clancy staring at me with shocked eyes and clenched teeth, while Ella shrank away, arm raised as if ready to fend me off. The only one not behaving oddly for a change was my father, but he was avoiding my eyes.

"What is wrong with all of you? Was there something in the water?"

Ella pointed at me. "B-Bonnie—your…your…"

"What? My what?"

When she only shook her head with a look of intensifying horror, insides in knots, I slowly looked into the puddle of water beneath me. I

numbly peered at my reflection.

What looked up at me was someone else.

Image softly rippling in the summer breeze, the shallow water reflected a girl with vibrant, chestnut-brown hair, redder than my own, and upturned, periwinkle-blue eyes, bigger than ever. This could have been the effects of the Summer Court’s vivid illumination and the lingering fright of the near-death experience.

But the girl looking back at me was tall and willowy. And sticking out from the sides of her longer, leaner face were pointed fairy ears.

CHAPTER SIX

Shock wasn’t the right word for what I felt as I stared at my reflection

I’d already hypothesized that I was some fairy runt, a changeling traded for a human child. But I hadn’t expected to have the truth confirmed like this. And not now.

Shaking all over with dismay, I tore my eyes away from the puddle and met Leander’s hostile gaze.

“What kind of trick is this?” he growled, making goosebumps storm up my arms. “Have you been a shapeshifter this whole time?”

“No!”

“Then where did you come from? And where is Bonnie?” Fear crept into his face and he pushed me out of the way, ready to dive back into the water. Clancy jumped on his back, attempting to drag him away. Leander growled as he tried to tear him off. “If this doppelgänger was the one I’ve been trying to save all along, Bonnie is still down there. I could still save her!”

“Leander, it’s not a trick, it is me!” I cried out.

He rounded on me with a roar that sent me flying back a few feet, knees knocking together. “You’re lying! You’re a part of this game, meant to torment us!”

“I-I’m not.” I raised shaky hands to my ears, feeling the pointed tips, then my face, longer, leaner. “I don’t know why I changed now of all times, but it isn’t a trick. And then if I was a doppelgänger, I would have looked exactly like the Bonnie, you know. I wouldn’t have outed myself as one being so much taller, and complete with pointy ears!”

He bared his fangs in a hiss when I tried to reach a hand to him. “You could have failed to imitate the way she looks exactly and are pretending you’re undergoing an inexplicable change.”

I shook my head vehemently, finding no answer to that, ended up crying out, “It *is* me.”

“Prove it! Tell me something only she would know.”

I sifted through my memories until I came to a spluttering result. “You were named after your great-uncle Oleander and I think one of your middle names is some clunky Cahramani king’s name?” I waved my hands, desperately grasping at the air as if I’d find the name there. “Uh…I can’t remember what it is, the only thing coming to mind is Artichoke.”

“Artacshir.” His suspicion lessened, but he remained stiff and on edge. “You’re telling me that this…” He made an encompassing gesture at me, “…is new to you?”

“Yes! Well, no. I never looked like this but I…” I was at a loss, unable to find answers for him when I had none myself. Until now I’d had only suspicions, ones I’d chosen not to share with him, knowing how he hated fairies.

His anger rose again, hurting way more, now that it was directed at me, and not the imposter he’d thought I was till a moment ago. “So you always knew you were a fairy, but somehow managed to hide the fact all this time. That still makes you a liar.”

My father came between us, a warning look blazing in his grey eyes. “She’s not! She didn’t know. And she wasn’t meant to ever be unveiled.”

“You knew!” I stomped, my prior fury at him reignited. “Of course, you knew.” He ducked his head, like I had pitched something at him. It made me even angrier. “Did Mum know? Or did you figure it out and keep it to yourself, as you did everything else?”

He raised his eyes to me then, frowning in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Neither I nor Leander got to respond to that, because another cannon blasted and the audience roared in excitement again. And again, the ground beneath us tilted.

With a startled gasp, I hit the sloping earth and tumbled down, my world spinning faster and faster as I rolled further into a new landscape.

My nauseating momentum ended with a hard slam into a log, knocking my lungs empty with a lacerating cough.

After the mind-numbing pain in my ribs and arm subsided to a steady throbbing, I pushed myself up, world swaying, and took in the foggy, moss-covered woods surrounding me.

Half the trees were packed with dying leaves of ochre and orange. The rest stood with their branches stark, silhouetted against the murky sky. Their dead, brown leaves covered the damp ground among sparse grass, rotting acorns, and roots crawling over the earth like veins on a crone's arm.

This had to be Autumn's contribution to the games. Had we been transported here by a portal? Or was their another kind of magic involved?

Not that how we'd gotten here mattered. Not when I couldn't begin to guess what we'd face this time. Or where the others were.

I stood, stumbling back a few steps as my head spun. It wasn't just the dizziness spawned by being tossed into the heart of this fairy forest, but my whole perspective had shifted.

Before, the fallen tree trunk beside me would have stopped at my hip. Now it was just over my knee. And the boughs that would have needed a ladder to reach now hung within reach.

Breathless, I reached up and my fingertips brushed the lowest branch. A mere hop would afford me a grasp firm enough for me to climb it. I had always wanted to climb a tree.

I really had become taller. Maybe as tall as Adelaide! But how?

"Bonnie!"

My father's voice bounced against the trees, as if coming from different directions. The tail end of his shout faded into a recurring note, like the caw of a distant bird.

I rushed ahead, uncertain where to go, still unsteady, feeling so much heavier than before. *"Dad?"*

My own call split in a dozen directions, and a response reached me half-formed, like it had taken a longer time to travel back to me. Then a higher, more urgent voice. Ella.

Barely half a dozen running steps later, I stepped on a rock and stumbled forward. I flapped my arms, trying to regain my balance, but the effort was pointless. I stumbled and fell face down with such speed I couldn't even ready my hands to break my fall.

I lay sprawled on the ground, mouth filled with dirt and leaves, pain radiating from my right cheekbone, bruised chest heaving beneath me.

I was so big and heavy all of a sudden, I didn't know how to navigate my own body!

I forced my unfamiliar mass back up, was spitting out debris and wiping my mouth when the next call broke over me like a crack of thunder.

"BONNIE!"

Leander! And his voice had a definite direction. It had come from the left!

Thanking the Fates for his jarring voice, I followed its trail before its echo could scatter too far, heading onto a clearer path. It had no rocks or acorns but swathes of broken twigs and branches, like something massive had decimated them in its wake.

The path soon darkened, with trees growing closer together, the shadows of their intertwining foliage blocking the light. The rustle of their dying leaves in the rising wind made me shudder. The clouds overhead had grown more ominous, and the humidity had doubled, soaking into my already wet hair and flesh, fattening up the fog that chilled me to the marrow.

Leander shouted my name again, louder, closer. But he sounded calmer, no frenzy or fury carrying his voice over to me. Hopefully, that meant whatever anger the sight of my ears had provoked had subsided—or at least, been postponed. My father owed us both an explanation, once we were done wading through this haunted forest and survived whatever threat they had prepared for us. Maybe killer giant squirrels this time.

But it seemed that no matter how much further I trudged through the woods, or how clear his calls became, I wasn't getting any closer to him. These woods seemed to disperse sound in incomprehensible patterns. Now there was movement that sounded so close by, two sets of feet at least. Ella and my father perhaps? But if it was them, why had they stopped calling out?

Maybe they realized calling out only led us around aimlessly? Or were afraid they'd only attract whatever threats lay in wait to their location?

I had to take that chance. Finding them outweighed any danger.

I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Dad! Ella! I'm here!"

Whatever response I was expecting, it wasn't the blood-curdling scream that sent me flying off the path and into a tree. My face collided

with it so hard my molars bit into my cheek. Pain burst inside my skull, spearing like a poker into my right temple.

Head spinning, I frantically peeled myself off the slimy trunk, chest heaving with shallow breaths as I looked around.

The scream sounded so near, but the pitch was so warped I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Suddenly, a squall blew behind me, drying wisps of my hair, sending them flying around my head. The sound of heavy footfalls approached from two directions at once, crunching dead leaves underfoot. Suddenly, a man's shout exploded, followed by a crash of splintering wood that echoed around me like thunder.

Struck immobile with terror, I hugged the tree as if it was a shield and swung frantic glances around. The movements returned, closer, sounding less like feet and more like hooves.

"Clancy?" I panted, voice cracking. "Clancy, is that you?"

His voice reached me from a totally darkened patch of the woods. "Where are you?"

Relief swept through me, the pent-up breath leaving my burning lungs in a shuddering rush. "You're getting close! Is Leander with you?"

"Yes!" Leander responded.

The movements neared, but my chest locked up again. Only Clancy's hooves echoed now.

Peering from behind the tree, I whispered, "Leander?"

The hooves stopped and Leander called out, "Over here."

Heart fluttering, I ran out, arm outstretched. "Oh, Leander…"

The sight of a massive, lipless mouth high up opening above me wrenched my vocal chords. And that was before the rest of the creature it belonged to stepped into the light. My legs almost buckled beneath me.

It was a giant centaur-like monster, gripping a large pole-ax. Puckered, hairless human skin stretched over the horse's body, its hooves made of bone. The human half bent over me, with lidless, solid-black eyes, and long, jagged teeth, their number ever increasing as its lipless mouth opened to speak.

"There you are," it said cheerily. In Leander's voice.

The utter wrongness of this sight shot rabid strength into my legs, my heart almost bursting out of my ribs, as I turned and exploded away.

But the longer leaps afforded by my new legs were not nearly enough. The monster galloped after me, its hooves like an approaching earthquake

on the forest floor that swallowed all noise, drowning my booming heartbeat in my ears.

Once close enough, it made a swipe at me. The axe-head cut through the air with a marrow-curdling swish. I threw myself forward with a shriek, feeling it barely miss lodging into my spine.

“Running is only going to make this harder,” it said calmly in Clancy’s voice, sounding like he had when he’d good-naturedly chastised Leander back in the castle. That mimicry alone sent a wave of revulsion fiercer than my visceral reaction to its appearance.

But it was dread for my friends that almost suffocated me. If it spoke with their voices, then what had happened to them? Was it like a raven? Simply mimicking them? Or was there an unthinkable reason for this? Did —did it *steal* their voices? How? What had it done to them? To Ella? To my father?

Blinded by my panic, I missed a fallen log, slamming my knee into it. Drilling pain tore into my bones as I soared over it and skidded on my belly onto the dirt.

The monster’s hooves approached, pounding like a war drum, refueling my mindless panic as I scrambled up and hurtled to the nearest tree.

I jumped, and my hands latched onto the bough. I tried to pull myself up, but I couldn’t, squirming in the air like a fish on a hook.

Cursing myself for never asking Adelaide to teach me how she scaled trees and walls, I tried to swing my legs up. Further pain sparked in my throbbing knee almost causing me to let go. But panic was for once on my side, pouring strength into my limbs and blanking the pain. I gritted my teeth until I felt I’d powder them, and managed to wrap my legs around the bough.

That didn’t spell safety, though. The creature arrived beneath me, its head mere feet away from the bag that hung off my back.

“Fun time’s over,” it said in my father’s voice, making all my muscles tighten up with horror. “It’s time for you to come down and face this like a grown-up. Now, let go or I’ll make you.”

Shaking my head, I maneuvered myself up onto the bough until I stood and started climbing smaller branches up the tree.

“You asked for it,” it tutted, in Leander’s voice.

Then it swung its axe.

The collision shook the whole tree, making leaves shower me in what felt like a downpour of needles, raining cuts on every exposed inch of my body. More swings followed, faster, harder, their quakes almost knocking me down, their impact tearing through the trunk.

It was going to cut me down!

Hands and legs shaking so hard I felt I'd drop at its feet any moment now, I blinked through the sweat burning into my eyes, looking around for anyone—anything that could get me out of this. There were only those dead trees around.

Half-cleaved, the tree began to bend back, a few hits away from falling over. I had one last thing to try before it did.

I waited until my end of the tree settled into an angle right above it. Then pushing as hard as I could to catapult myself, hoping it would also send the whole thing crashing down on the monster, I leapt.

I flew through the air faster than I thought I would. But somehow that didn't affect my focus as it centered on the branch where I wanted to land in the nearby tree, nor the involuntary grace with which I landed onto it.

The moment I did, I jumped again, going to the next tree in a single, curving hop, loaded with the precision of a grasshopper, and landed on the thickest arm without so much as a stumble.

How did I do *that*? Had I been capable of that my entire life? Or was—

A slam shook the tree I'd settled on so hard I lost my balance and fell off with a scream.

I cartwheeled through my descent, hoping to catch a branch. But none was there to save me as I spun towards the ground. I couldn't even close my eyes before I hit the ground.

But the bone-crushing impact didn't come. Only a whip-like splash.

COLD, DIRTY WATER HAD BROKEN MY FALL. I FELT AS IF I'D HIT A gelatinous barrier, the stinging slap flaming over my back. But instead of sinking fathoms deep like last time, I thudded at the bottom of a shallow pond.

Every inch of my body burned. My head swam with panic for myself, and dread for the others. But I couldn't focus on any of that. I had to climb out. I might not drown in those slimy, stagnant waters, but I was a sitting duck for the monster.

It was fast approaching, axe swinging, ready to split me in two like it had those trunks.

I threw myself up on the edge, clawing at the grass and dirt, trying to pull myself out in time to escape it. But the water felt like quicksand, and I felt too heavy and in too much pain.

It galloped closer, raising its weapon, and taunted me with my own voice. “Don’t worry. You won’t feel a thing.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I prayed the others would survive, and braced for my beheading.

But instead of a swishing cleave of steel ending my life, a bird of prey’s shriek ripped the air.

My eyes tore open to find the monster stopped dead in its tracks, its head turned up. I looked in the same direction in time to see the fog split, shedding light on the furious mass of red feathers that came shooting down towards us.

The giant vulture landed feet-first onto the creature, stabbing talons into its eyes with an ear-splitting screech. “Don’t touch her!”

Jessamine!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The creature howled in agony and blindly swung its axe at Jessamine.

She only shot up out of its reach and swerved towards me.

Blood roaring in my ears, I raised my hands for her, and she swooped down and hooked her arms under mine, lifting me out of the pond and into the air.

“Are you all right?”

I let out a sobbing gasp at her panting question, enervated with relief. “I-I think so.”

Suddenly, we dropped a few feet in the air, our shocked shouts mingling.

It was only at her pained groan that I remembered her injury, when Castor had shot her with a crossbow out of the sky. “Jessie, your wing!”

“It’s mostly healed, we’ll be fine,” she gritted, readjusting her hold on me, her face a mask of pain as her wings flapped harder. But no matter how much she strained and how fast her wings beat, we just teetered between maintaining our speed and dropping out of the air entirely.

All the while, the creature galloped after us, now bellowing in its own voice, inhuman, jarring. It had to have made the scream I’d heard earlier.

“What is that thing?” I gasped. “And where have you been? Have you found the others?”

“I think your father called it a knuckelavee,” she panted. “The guards in the city missed catching me, so I’ve been hiding, and trying to figure out where they took Clancy and the Master. I think they’ve now reached

the end of whatever this place is. I told them they'd never find you on the ground, that only I could find you from the air. It took some convincing—uhh…"

We dipped again, ripping another yelp from me. "Jessie, maybe you should fly slower?"

"And risk that thing catching up with us?"

"I'm just afraid you'll cause yourself irreversible damage."

"Nothing could be as bad as what that thing can do to us."

She sped up so we soared towards the brighter part of the woods in the distance. As we drew closer, I could see the silhouettes of Clancy's horns and Ella's dress blowing in the wind.

The knuckelavee howled below and I heard something hurtle up at us.

"Jessie, look out!"

The axe slammed into the tree by us, cleaving off a branch as it passed and startling her into almost dropping me.

"Why won't that thing just stay maimed?" she hissed, struggling to fly higher.

I didn't dare look beneath me, but I could guess that she meant its eyes had grown back.

"Did you try that before?"

"No. But Clancy ran it through with his horns, and its chest just sealed back up before it retreated to chase you—AH!" Her wings stuttered and her arms around me loosened.

The instant it took for me to drop from her hold to having her talons dig into my shoulders was the longest of my life. Like my existence was poised to flash across my eyes before I met my end in a broken heap on the ground, or worse, at the hands of that knuckelavee.

"Sorry! I don't know if my arms are getting weaker or if you got heavier," she wheezed. "I swear, the last time we did this you weren't this much of a burden."

I couldn't help cringing. Out of everyone in our group now, I was genuinely a burden, having to be constantly saved.

With a few more hard flaps, Jessamine halted her wings, keeping them spread, gliding silently, briefly, the loudest thing in the woods the hooves of the knuckelavee. Its pursuit was untiring, but the agitation it spurred slackened as we grew closer to our friends.

Gravity caught hold of us as we began our descent towards a clearing among the trees. But instead of setting me on my feet in a smooth landing, Jessamine dropped me on the gravel-strewn ground and tumbled after me with a startled squawk.

Clancy rushed to us, helping her up. “Thank goodness, you’re safe.”

Ella sprinted towards me, but instead of doing the same to me, she leapt over my head. “Not for long!”

To my utmost horror, she had thrown herself at the monster, catching it around the waist, making it come to a grinding halt. Before it could react, Ella swung her legs to the side and upwards, landing astride its back. When it began to rear and roar in outrage, she hooked a belt around its neck, pulling on it with teeth-clenching effort. “NOW!”

Clancy charged, head lowered, and met its chest, horns first, impaling it so deeply it dropped the axe.

It let out a shrill, teeth-grinding scream, like the scrape of a rusting metal, bucking Ella off its back and ripping Clancy back by his hair to lift him up to its mouth. Bleating furiously, Clancy aimed a hard kick to its bleeding chest, getting it to drop him onto his hooves. He quickly sprinted back, picked Ella up and ran towards the trees. The knuckelavee galloped after them in a frenzy.

The moment he reentered the woods, Leander jumped down from the obscuring darkness. He dug his claws into its healing eyes and shouted, “Fairborn, the axe!”

Out from where Clancy and Ella had disappeared, my father emerged and hurtled to sweep the fallen axe off the ground. With Leander incapacitating the creature, my father had the opportunity to swing its own weapon up, jamming the blade into its neck.

It couldn’t even scream, arms spasming at its sides as thick, ink-black blood spewed out of its gurgling mouth.

Legs buckling, it hit the ground in two slams, one for the horse end, and another for the humanoid half.

Leander stepped off its shuddering corpse, wiping his black, blood-soaked fingers on his shirt, frowning at the others. “This wasn’t the plan. I was supposed to attack first.”

My father shrugged. “I’m not complaining.”

Clancy walked back towards them, leading an oddly unperturbed Ella by her wrist. “You should be.”

My father picked his belt off the ground, cocking an eyebrow at him. “Should I?”

Clancy frowned at him. “That was a mighty swing for an old man. You sure you didn’t throw your back out?”

My father snorted dismissively. “I’m a blacksmith. I’ve swung heavier and harder things since before you were born. And I’m not *old*.”

“You’re a lot of surprising things it seems.” I exhaled a trembling sigh, accepting the offered hug as he approached. “Honestly, though, are you all right?”

He gave me a brief, tight hug, no longer bending over as he always did during our embraces. It was a sharp reminder that my head could now effortlessly rest on his shoulder, that I had gone through a yet unexplained transformation so fast I kept forgetting about it.

Seeking out Leander, I wondered if he had forgotten as well, or at least was ready to overlook it.

But in the way he avoided my eyes I could see he hadn’t, and wasn’t.

Ella came up to us, her hair in complete disarray. “What did you say that thing was?”

“A knuckelavee, a frequent nuisance at the borders of the Autumn Court. It lures its prey by playing mind tricks on them.” My father extended an arm to her, and she looked between us with uncertainty. I reached out and pulled her closer by her dress, so both of us hugged her. “Though in my experience, they work in groups to run you into a corner. This one worked alone, and tried to lure us out, instead.”

“Must be a special knucklehead,” Ella grumbled, pulling back to eye Jessamine, who approached us, wings half-blocking Clancy and Leander. “And what are you supposed to be? If there’s a Lord Satyr and Prince Werewolf, does that make you Lady Harpy?”

Jessamine winced, dropping her wings. “I’m not a lady. Just someone who does housework who got roped into all this.”

Ella cracked an awkward smile at her. “Me too.”

“I’m sorry about this, Ella, I really am,” I said sadly.

She waved me off. “Don’t be. I’d rather go through ten more trials in whatever this is than be back at my house, scrubbing floors until I can see myself in them, or standing all day before the stove or doing anything that involves heat…” She trailed off, looking around us. “Are these places

really parts of those courts you mentioned? Is the Autumn Court always autumn?”

My father shook his head. “They do have their own versions of seasons. For instance, it never snows in the winter of Summer, and the summer in Winter is cool and rainy. The people in each Court aren’t bothered by their extremes, but they are affected if they travel to another part of Faerie.”

She let out a wistful sigh. “Must be nice for it to always be winter, but where you never fear freezing. You’d only need fire for cooking.”

I twisted my lips at him. “Is there more Faerie trivia you’d care to share with me, Dad?”

But he was peering behind us, and suddenly yelled, “No! Leave it!”

I swung around to find Leander bent over the creature, hand frozen over the handle of the axe. “We could need a weapon in the next challenge.”

My father shook his head. “I’m sure we could, but if you take that out, it will only heal and come after us again.”

“How do you know all these things again?” Leander asked, tone terse, with a suspicious frown. “I’m sure your daughter and I are dying to hear the full story.”

Hearing him say “your daughter” rather than “Bonnie” or even “Miss Fairborn” stung, and brought hot discomfort pricking my eyes.

Nodding, my father started walking towards the end of the woods. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but the sooner we’re done with those games and out of Summer the better. We need to get to Autumn.”

That statement was too interesting to not be my first question. I jogged after him, pulling both Jessamine and Ella along. “What’s in Autumn? Is it safer?”

“Not necessarily, but I know a few people there who could help us.”

“Who?”

He gave me a vague expression, what I’d always mistaken for absentmindedness.

I sighed. “You know you can stop being evasive now, right? At this point, I won’t be surprised if it turned out you’ve played chess with the Horned God himself on weekends.”

He let out a tired, uneasy laugh. “I know. Force of habit, I suppose.”

The rest gathered around us as we moved ahead, Leander a noticeable distance away from me, fielding paranoid questions from Ella about his wolfish appearance. Jessamine and Clancy were off to the side, trading complaints about their metamorphosing bodies.

Back in the castle, Leander and I had stumbled upon them discussing how the curse was affecting them far faster than it had before, and the discomfort and dread their transformations created. Judging by the way Jessamine couldn't seem to walk properly, her fear of losing her knees to her avian legs had come true.

"I think I have giant ankles now," she whispered behind me. "Their formation has changed too. I try to put one foot in front of the other, but I just end up waddling like a pigeon."

"How's your eyesight?" he asked her. "I can't tell what my eyes look like now, but they're not what they used to be."

She let out a soft, worried gasp. "Have you gone color-blind?"

"No, no, I can still see colors but they're different." Clancy paused, seeming to be thinking something over. "Actually, I think I can see everything but red now. Which is odd, because I know I can see purple and orange."

My stomach flipped with deep unease. Did this mean he couldn't see her red hair and feathers anymore? Was it just a dull, muted grey to him now? If this much had changed in the time we'd been apart, what state would they be in another day?

But it was pointless to ponder that now. Not when we needed to last long enough to finish the games first.

Turning, I found her leaning on him. When they noticed me, they looked ready to jump apart like they always had, but I gave them my best encouraging smile. Easing up, Jessamine smiled bashfully and linked her arm back through Clancy's. Her arms did seem shorter, but I didn't know if they were retreating up into her body or if they just appeared so in comparison to her bigger wings.

Her yellow, owl-like eyes grew wider. "I know my legs have compressed, but not by that much."

"What do you mean?" Clancy asked her, blushing profusely at their linked arms, pushing his glasses back up his flattening nose bridge.

"Bonnie looks taller, doesn't she?"

Clancy grimaced, and Leander looked up from Ella's interrogation. Chest tightening, I tried to meet his eyes and gauge his feelings, now that the reality of what I was had sunk in.

His harsh, beastly features were scrunched up in a frown; not one of hostility but of reservation, as if he was around an animal he wasn't sure was dangerous or just appeared so.

Cold wind gusted against my chest, nipping at my damp clothes and hair, blowing the drying strands around my face as we reached the end of our path. Whatever I'd wanted to say to Leander fled my mind as I noticed the scattering flecks of snow blowing past me, a moment before I almost went blind.

When my vision cleared, my eyes burned with the glaring whiteness before us, and the frosty wind that dried them out.

Wind spiraled in the distance, sweeping snow into a swirling gale that grew larger and more powerful, approaching us rapidly, its pull too strong to resist.

Dad gripped my hand, and I reached behind me, for Jessamine, for anyone, but the whirlwind swallowed us whole, pulling us up into its spinning center faster than I could scream.

Weightless and whirling too fast see anything, I felt as if I had been flung back into a magical portal, but this time with no destination. I clung to my father's arm as his shouts for me to hang on grew muted against the deafening din, praying this wouldn't lead to another separation, from him or any of the others.

But newfound strength meant nothing against this force and my father soon slipped through my freezing fingers.

This couldn't keep happening. I'd nearly gotten everyone back. All I had left was to finish this maddening game, save my friends from their curse, then find Ada. I had to save them all, like they kept saving me, so I couldn't lose anyone ever again.

But the ruthless spinning soon overpowered me, swathing my mind in dizziness until I could no longer think through the encompassing nausea. At one point, gravity sank its hooks into me, and I wound down through the narrow end of the wind funnel. Fighting through the disorientation, I struggled to brace myself, getting ready to hit the ground running.

But like I had with Jessamine earlier, I didn't lose momentum like a falling leaf before settling on the ground. I was practically spat out,

smacking down on the snow with a *crunch*.

Luckily, it was deep and soft enough to break my fall. Through the burst of pain on impact, nothing felt broken or twisted. All I had to worry about was the cold. I had to get up and move; had to find a way out and find all of the others, before I lost too much body heat.

As I struggled to my knees, soundless in the whistling wind, someone stepped before me.

I peered up, eyes burning against the winter sun. My heart almost stopped when I finally saw who came into focus.

Standing stark against the white wasteland, her black hair blowing in the wind, was my best friend, Adelaide.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ada. The one real friend I'd had all my life. The one who'd made my life of isolation bearable, even delightful in the short time she'd lived with us. The one I'd wanted to explore the world with. I'd been willing to do anything to get her back, to save her from the fairy who'd kidnapped her.

But she was here. *Here!*

In a burst of excitement, I forgot everything about my predicament as I heaved up on uncoordinated limbs—only to sink back into the snow. The cold had gone from a superficial sting to encasing me with a bone-deep chill, spasming my taxed muscles and burning my exposed skin.

The cyclone hadn't done much in the way of drying me, and that made the cold tear through me faster, cranking my shivers up into intensifying shudders.

"Ada!" I crawled towards her, nose running, and arms shaking, but uncaring about it all. I'd found her. After I lost her what felt like ages ago. "Ada—I-I can't believe I found you. You won't b-believe what I've been through to get here!"

Strangely, she didn't rush to help me up or launch into a lecture about me endangering myself. In fact, she didn't do anything, she just stood there, head aimed down at me, her dark eyes staring at me, her mouth quirked in a vague smile.

Maybe she didn't recognize me?

I finally rose up, shoulders hunched, arms stiffly around my middle as I shook, lips trembling as my breath flared out like a trail of pipe smoke.

“It *is* me, Ada. I know I look a little different, but you do too, so it looks like we have a lot to catch up on, right?”

She just hummed, seemingly in agreement.

My face was so frozen I barely managed a frown as I approached her, reaching out, fingers stuck together with cold. “I d-don’t know how long you’ve been here—years I’m guessing—g-going by how long your hair is now.”

When she finally moved, my tension loosened, even as my stiffness deepened. It would have been a nightmare if we’d come this far, only to reunite with her having been frozen upright. She offered out her own arms, to catch me if I fell, to hug me, a sight so familiar and comforting, a sob tore out of my frozen depths.

Forcing my stiff legs forward, I threw myself into her arms. “I’m s-so sorry I took so long to find you. It’s only been a few weeks for me, but I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you.” I curved my trembling arms around her, teeth chattering as I rested my aching head on her shoulder, the new pointed tips of my ears both the coldest and numbest part of my freezing body.

All the things I wanted to say—that I had reached Arbore, that I was a changeling—flew off with the last puff of determination I had. Here in her arms, I felt like a roaring fireplace that got a bucketful of water dumped on it, dousing its fire into wispy smoke.

“But it’s going to be—to be all right. We’re going t-to find the others, then we—we can e-escape…”

I couldn’t hold my eyes open any longer. I just wanted to sag deeper into her embrace and faint. From relief? The cold? The exertion it had taken to get here? The reason was unclear, and irrelevant. I was suddenly feeling so weak, so sleepy—so very, very sleepy.

“Everything…everything will be fine,” I mumbled breathlessly.

Her humming had grown louder, blending with the sound of the wind, lulling me into a mindless ease I hadn’t felt in ages.

Something out there mingled with her calm hum, then it grew loud enough to disrupt it. A shout, too far away to be a jarring intrusion. I didn’t care to know what it was or where it came from. Nothing else mattered but my slow sink into senselessness.

A thunderous roar had me opening my eyes with a stunned gasp.

“BONNIE!”

Wakefulness trickled back into me as I took a step back to see who had found us.

Leander ran towards me, arms now longer than before. I felt less tired, as if the sight of him roused me, reminded me where I was and what I had been looking for.

I reached back for Adelaide, to assure her that he was a friend that meant us no harm—but she was—she was *gone*.

Vanished into thin air!

I looked around frantically as Leander came to a halt by me, scattering snow as he straightened with difficulty.

“Bonnie!” He gripped my wrists, raising them to show me the backs of my hands and forearms. The veins had risen up against my skin, looking like the black marks on white marble. “What happened? Is this another fairy thing?”

“No, it’s…I-I don’t know…”

Adelaide reappeared behind him, her hair still effortlessly flying by her like a flag, independent of the wind causing mine to riot. But when he stepped aside to see what I was staring at, I found that it wasn’t her at all.

It was a girl, a tad shorter than Ada with skin a few shades paler, and her eyes were his same piercing turquoise, starkly vivid against the surrounding whiteness.

He let out a shuddering breath of disbelief, dropping my hands to reach them out to her. “Fay? *Fairuza?*”

His sister? But how could she have ended up here? Last we knew she had been sent to their mother’s homeland of Cahraman, to marry its crown prince.

“Fairuza, don’t be scared. It’s me, it’s Leo.”

While he approached her, I decided to give them some space, and seek out Adelaide, wondering where she could have gone so fast. The sight of Leander approaching must have scared her off. And if I knew anything from all the stories she’d told me about evading threats, it wasn’t beyond her to bury herself under the snow to wait one out.

Trudging ahead, hoping the effort would drum up some heat in my shivering body, I tried to shake off the strange sleepiness that still gripped me. I circled an icy mound, fenced in by tall coniferous trees. Their wood was grey, their leaves weighed down with snow, and their visible boughs dangled icicles. I saw Jessamine soaring above, her red hair and feathers

the only spot of color in this place. I made the mistake of hopping up to wave at her, sinking further into the snow on landing.

She suddenly took a quick dive towards a stretch of leafless, opalescent trees. When she reappeared, she was leading my father and Clancy out, but not Ella.

Where was she? And where was Adelaide?

Dreamy humming filled the air, getting louder, sweeter, feeling like a warm bed and a hot meal, so soothing I could feel my limbs growing heavier, and my mind quieting further.

I blinked sluggishly at my father who was stalking towards me, eyes glazed, arms extended. But he passed me and went to embrace a woman who stood still among the snow behind me. Not my best friend, not Leander's sister, but…

"Lainey?" Dad whispered raggedly, body shaking.

The woman resembled my reflection in the puddle, willowy, with rosy cheeks, big, upturned blue eyes, but with wavy hair that was closer to auburn than my own chestnut color.

The ghost of my mother greeted my father with open arms, and my dulled senses became awash with longing. Not just for myself but for my father, who clung to her, knees buckling as he sobbed against her hair. I couldn't remember her, let alone them together, so seeing them now made anything and anyone else not matter at all.

Still—there was this distant nagging feeling at the back of my mind. It felt like I was mingling a daydream with a task whose details I couldn't care to remember.

Leander swayed by me, his unsteady stomps crushing the ice beneath his big feet as he distractedly muttered his sister's name. That was when I remembered I was searching for a friend—for two of them.

I trudged behind him, and we seemed to chase our tails endlessly, calling for Adelaide, Ella, and Fairuza. Then Clancy joined us, also searching for the sisters he hadn't seen in years, and Jessamine crashed into the snow, calling for her mother.

It was when my father followed her, my mother's name the last thing he uttered before growing still in a heap on the snow, that a sense of foreboding speared through my daze.

Something was wrong.

Not just wrong—sinister.

I'd come to Summer to find Adelaide, so finding her forced to partake in these games with us as a prisoner could be explained. Fairuza's presence could be attributed to the Spring Queen who'd cursed her, who could have taken her, like the fairy woman had taken my friend. But the rest—especially the departed women we had longed to see…

It was as if hot water poured over my frozen mind, melting the numbness, blowing away the haze.

This was a magic trick! And we had all fallen for it with mortifying ease.

But none of the others seemed to be snapping out of the trance. I felt I had only because I'd seen all the versions this entity had turned into, and the illogic eventually cut through the illusion. Was that because I was a fairy? If so, they wouldn't snap out of it!

I had to do something.

Feeling the brunt of the cold again, I shook from head to toe as I stumbled back to the huddled group, now each lost in their own hallucination.

"It's a trick!" A cracked shriek was all my frozen vocal chords could produce. "It's the obstacle in this challenge! It's taking the shape of our loved ones, a lure that would keep us here until it leeches our heat and life, and freezes us to death!"

None turned to me, my warnings falling on entranced ears.

I threw myself at Leander's back, making him stumble, but he didn't even turn to me. I gripped his shirt and my father's, pulling on them, begging them, to no avail.

Then I saw Ella approaching us, gripping a petrified, broken branch. Shallow breaths released white puffs that covered half her face, her hair curling and her eyes wide as she stared at the being holding the rest hostage.

"Don't look at it!" I wailed.

The being melted into a hazy figure then reassembled as a woman with tan skin and golden hair. She held her hands out to Ella, and my last shred of hope joined my fleeing body heat.

Next moment, Ella had let out a furious scream and stabbed the apparition of her mother with the branch!

Ella's mother only disappeared in a swirling cloud of fog and reformed right before me, as Adelaide. Only it wasn't her. It never had been.

She reached for me, that magical hum growing louder, its pull towards enforced calmness and surrender becoming stronger. But I knew what it was now.

I jammed my fingers in my ears and yelled, “Don’t look at her everyone! Don’t listen to her!”

“Better yet, run!” Ella gave my father a fierce shove, causing the first crack in his haze, before doing the same to Clancy and Jessamine. I turned my back on the spirit, ignoring the ache the sight of Adelaide caused, and pushed at Leander as forcefully.

“Quick! Run!”

“Why?” he mumbled, disoriented, eyes heavy-lidded with the numbness of cold.

“Because if we don’t it will eat us!”

Ella and I herded our dazed group towards the end of the snowy landscape, towards a path shadowed by yew trees with their tops linked together. The closer we got, the more awake I felt, effort spreading heat to my frozen extremities and flushing my face. And with that rush of blood, my sense fully returned to me.

The knuckelavee’s mimicry had counted on the darkness of the woods and our separation. But this snow spirit was out in the open, luring us with the faces of our loved ones. I didn’t know if it was truly that adept at manipulating our thoughts, or if it depended on our own willingness to be deceived, to give in to it, just for the sake of seeing those we lost again.

But it wasn’t easy to evade. It kept reappearing to us, emerging from nothingness as a different woman each time, working its predatory magic on the others again.

Ella stabbed the apparition of Fairuza as she overtook us, severing its hold on Leander, gritting as she ran, “Does anything in this realm die?”

“Not easily,” my father panted, pushing me further ahead of him. “The only thing Faerie’s denizens have a vulnerability to is iron. But I don’t think this is a fairy creature.”

“Only one way to find out!” I reached into his coat, taking out the poker he’d used to fend of Ella’s stepfamily, and put myself between us and the spirit as it reformed behind us.

My mother’s face stared back at me, hand held out, smile calm and comforting, and I finally understood Ella’s rage upon seeing hers—which had possibly broken the illusion for her.

This horrid thing desecrated my mother's memory, using our love for her to feed on us and end our lives. It fired me up far more than the fear of it consuming us could have.

Gripping the poker with both hands, I swung. I cut through its form, splitting it into masses of dense vapor, severing its continuous lulling hum by a hellish, expiring screech.

Watching its lingering wisps fade into the crisp, cold air, I panted out furious breaths. That thing had nearly broken my father, taunting him with the image of his departed wife. It had done the same to Leander, to all of us, and I could feel none of us would recover from the heart-wrenching experience anytime soon.

I wished it would re-materialize so I could stab it again and again.

A hand settled on my shoulder, too big to be my father's.

I looked up to find Leander, scattered flecks of snow sticking to his long hair and beard, his skin starkly pale in their midst, dark capillaries still mapping his skin from the spirit's siphoning. "Are you—*Bonnie, your hands!*"

Startled, I dropped the poker, raising my hands. I could see nothing but that they were bigger and my fingers longer, the strained blood vessels fading back into my skin. "What about them?"

Gingerly, he reached out and took one hand, and ran the tip of his roughened thumb across my palm. "I don't understand. You were holding iron. It should have burned you."

My breath caught in my throat as I looked from my intact hand to the iron rod lying on the frosted ground of the tunnel of trees we'd reached.

I bent to pick the poker up again, the dried purple blood of Dolora still staining it.

My father beat me to it, snatching it up with a frown pleating his brow. "I never put it to the test, couldn't bear to find out. What if it could burn you? I thought it did once, and that was why I forbade you to use anything in the kitchen or come to my forge. But it seems you take after me in immunity to fairy weaknesses."

"What are you talking about?" I wheezed, throat tight. "I can't take after you! I'm a changeling, made to resemble and replace your actual child. I know you know this, and for some reason you've chosen to accept it. But I can't!"

He let out a tired huff, reaching out to pull me into a one-armed embrace. “As I tried to tell you earlier, you’re not a changeling. You’re my daughter, no question about it.”

I goggled at him, pinching the new, pointed tips of my ears. “But I’m a fairy!”

Sadness ebbed and flowed in his pale eyes as he nodded. “So was your mother.”

CHAPTER NINE

It might have been the turmoil my mind had been in since I'd ended up in Arbore. Or the exhaustion I'd suffered since we'd come to Faerie. But now I couldn't even react to the statement that pulled the rug out from under my whole existence.

"That's…not possible." I almost didn't recognize my voice, calm and distant, as I blinked slowly at my father. "No matter how young I was or how much time has passed, I would have remembered something like Mum being a literal fairy."

He nodded. "Yes, you would have, which was why she cast a glamor over herself to appear as a plain human when she came to Aubenaire with me, and later put one on you."

I stared at him, feeling as if I'd smacked my head on the cold, hard ground of a reality far weirder than any fantasy I'd ever had. Not even after finding out magic and curses exist. Not even after I'd realized I was a fairy.

"Which makes you only half-fey," he added, correcting my last thought. "Hence, the iron immunity. Belaina had suggested that you could be a mix of our traits, but I didn't want to risk it and kept you away from everything that could potentially cause you harm."

"So you kept me away from life in general." He nodded again, his gaze repentant, and the slow-setting shock started fading. After years of begging for answers about my mother, or anything that could have given me a sense of identity, aside from "blacksmith's daughter," frustrated tears surged up, wetting my worn eyes as I gritted my teeth. "This whole time you kept me cooped up, not letting me learn to cook, sew, visit your forge,

do anything, or go anywhere unaccompanied, was because you were afraid I'd find out?"

He shook his head. "Not just you, but anyone else."

"Your mother must have overcompensated with that spell, considering how much bigger you've turned out to be." Ella returned to our side, shifty-eyed and tense, as if expecting the snow spirit to puff back into being, or me to lash out. She held her hand out to indicate our respective heights. I was maybe an inch shorter. Thanks to her Southern mother, Ella had been the tallest girl in town until Adelaide showed up. "Your mother couldn't have intended to keep you gnome-sized."

"Actually, she did," my father said.

"Why?" I snapped, unable to rein in my anger anymore. "So you two could give me an excuse for why I had to be smothered my entire life? Why I should stay put and be coddled into adulthood?" I raised shaking hands to trace my sharper bone structure, my bigger features, the elongated curves of cartilage that were my new ears. I shuddered at the idea that I'd been weighed down by such a severe spell that suppressed my true form. "Did Adelaide know about me? Is that why she was the one I was allowed to be around? Because she made the perfect babysitter? Is she really my cousin? Was she a fairy wearing a glamor as well?"

My father raised a hand to fend me off from my swarm of heated questions. "Adelaide was not a fairy, but her mother was a witch. Dorreya appeared one day at the edge of the Hornswoods, and pegged your mother as a fellow magical being. They were both pregnant, with Belaina around a month further along. Dorreya stayed with us and their intention was to raise you together. But she had to leave to escape a stronger witch who was hunting her down."

Had Adelaide known all that and kept it from me? The idea stabbed and twisted in my heart like that poker.

But—if that woman who'd chased her mother to the end of the island was another witch then…

I felt the blood pumping in my throbbing head drop to my heels, making me sway as I choked, "That woman who kidnapped Ada and threw us into Arbore wasn't a fairy from Summer as I thought. The woman was just a witch! But from where? Where could she have taken Ada if not to Faerie?"

“That is one answer I don’t have,” my father admitted sadly. “But we’ll find her, once we get out of here in one piece.”

I let out a ragged exhalation, trying to dissipate the tears of shock and frustration building behind my eyes. “You promise?”

He placed a hand on his heart. “I promise.”

Leander shifted beside us, reminding me where we were. “So you knew nothing of this your entire life? The only deception here was on the part of your parents?”

I nodded, both annoyed that he needed this reassurance even now, and ashamed I hadn’t told him of my suspicions when I should have. “At this point, I know as much as you do.”

His still shook his head. “But what finally made you change?”

“It was likely the water,” Clancy piped up as he clomped closer. “I remember reading about certain ponds being gateways to Faerie, with their waters having the power to cleanse enchantments. That pool must have had the same characteristic.”

“Going by your track record of random but always accurate bits of information, I’m going to trust that you’re right.” Leander looked everywhere but at me, nervously extending and curling his big, clawed fingers, so stiff now they couldn’t form fists. The sight of him, so uncomfortable by my newly altered appearance and his own fairy-cursed transformation, made me feel worse. He finally sighed. “It seems that we were both deprived of our true forms by the whims of a fairy, and through our mothers. Though mine did so indirectly and yours had to have a good reason.”

“What reason could that have been?” I experimentally tucked my dried hair behind my ears, the absence of the curved shells I’d had all my life a strange sensation, to say the least. But the rigidity of the points that replaced them kept the hair back.

“The goal was to make her unassuming,” my father said to Leander, “so she wouldn’t attract the attention of locals, or any fairies that came looking for Belaina.”

Ella beat me to the question. “Why would anyone come looking for her mother? Does this have anything to do with my stepmother and her daughters? Is that why they showed up in Aubenaire of all places?”

“Frankly, I never had proof that Dolora wasn’t human until yesterday. But no, what Belaina was avoiding was far more powerful.” My father

scratched the back of his head, letting out a tired huff. “I never understood the intricacies of the problem, but once we get to the Autumn Court, we’ll find someone who can explain everything far better than I can.”

“And how do we get there?” Jessamine appeared over Ella’s shoulders, making her recoil with instinctive fear. “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.”

Ella remained hunched, but her stare was more bewildered than unsettled. “I, uh…is it me or did your nose get beaky…er?”

Jessamine slapped her hands over her face and her wings hitched up. “I can’t raise my arms higher than this!” Her lower lip trembled, not from the lingering cold in the tree tunnel, but from the dread that crept into her at the realization, dilating her yellow eyes. “They’re becoming one. I won’t have arms soon—just wings.”

Leander reached for my bag. “The rose, is it…?”

The rose! I frantically dug into my soggy bag through ruined books and food, and pulled out the jar. It was thankfully unharmed through all my tumbles. But the state of the glass wasn’t what concerned me, but what floated inside.

Now glowing a vivid royal blue, the rose looked even more magical in its native realm. But beneath it was a clutch of petals that made my heart seize.

Six petals had fallen. The passage of time in each Court must apply in their parts of the game. Autumn and winter had the shortest days, which meant most of the time we’d lost had been lost to fighting the knuckelavee and the snow spirit.

But we still had time. And we had just one more challenge, that of Spring. If we survived it, we would reach the Spring Queen here. We’d claim our magical prize and break the curse. This might have actually worked out for the best.

I stuck the jar back in my bag, urgency rising within me like bubbles in boiling water. “We have to get through the next test fast! And this time, we make sure we don’t get separated!”

Everyone shuffled reluctantly until Leander ripped out a crackling growl. “You heard her—move! Fast!”

Clancy spilled into an alarmed trot, with Jessamine shooting up to soar above him.

My father urged Ella ahead, but she kept mumbling complaints. “Can’t we take a break? I’m not ready for whatever eight-headed dragon awaits us

at the end of this woodsy passage."

"We've stayed here long enough," my father said, nudging her ahead. "The Fates know forever in Faerie could be a blink of an eye, especially when we go back to our world."

Ella shot me a distressed look over her shoulder. "Do we have to go back to Aubenaire?"

"No," I said firmly.

"Bonnie, you can't make that decision for her," my father protested. "She has her father, and a family in the South."

"A father and a family who did nothing while that ogre and her spawn were bewitching and enslaving me," Ella snapped crankily. "Everyone showed up at my mother's funeral and after that, once a year for the dumb parties Dolora and my father threw. Not once did anyone invite me to live with them, or object to me being made to wear rags while that monster's daughters lived like queens." She sped up, as if to put a greater distance between our hometown and herself. "As far as I'm concerned, I have nothing to go back to."

"So, what are you going to do then?" I asked.

"Help you find Ada?"

"And after that?"

She shrugged. "Considering I don't know if we'll make it out of this place alive, I'll leave the life plans for later."

Leander fell into step with us. "If we get what we came for, you're welcome to come back with us to Arbore. Once we're all human again, I'll be reinstated as Crown Prince and Rosemead Castle will be my official residence. You can be employed in whichever part you wish. If housework is something you'd like to avoid, I could—I don't know, send you to Court to be my sister's companion?"

Stumbling back a step, Ella gawked at Leander. "Are you serious?"

"I know I don't have much in the way of expressiveness now, but this is me being serious," he deadpanned, making me almost laugh. "Bonnie once told me about you. I believe she said your father was a lord? If you're of noble stock you can be a lady-in-waiting to a princess."

"Why would you do any of that for me?" Ella asked him in a small voice.

"Because you need help that I can give you," he said, his vivid eyes gleaming with sincerity. "What do you think?"

Pride bloomed within me, filling my chest with a sappy warmth for him. I'd felt stymied, helpless to plan anything for her, or offer her any solution for a better life. And he'd swooped in, with more than one amazing option to help this complete stranger, who until recently was terrified of him.

This was who he was underneath the beastly exterior. I couldn't tell if it had been unearthed during our time together, or if it had already been there, unseen by all.

Ella lit up, folding her hands over her chest as tears of disbelief filled her eyes. "'Lord' is more of a courtesy title. All we have is a dusty old manor and some connections but yes! Lady-in-waiting, companion, castle staff, whichever you see fit—I'll do it!" Stopping short, her attempt to hug us both nearly tipped us all over. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*"

I couldn't help laughing at her burst of gratitude and affection, and at the face I caught Leander making in response. He looked like he had never experienced such a reaction, which made me resolve to start ambushing him with hugs in the future.

The future. Where would I end up after we dealt with the Spring Queen and most of our group returned to Arbore?

We resumed our pace and Ella skipped ahead, no longer seeming to worry about the possible eight-headed dragons in our path.

I tapped Leander's arm. "What about me? Do I get to be Fairuza or Esmeralda's fancy friend, or am I missing a few requirements?"

He shook his head softly, eyes meeting mine for the first time in what felt like eons. "You can be whatever you want to be."

Right now, there was nothing I wanted more than to be his savior, rather than the one constantly being saved. I wanted to free him and our friends like we had both freed Ella from her situation—or we would, if we all survived the next test.

As the sun poured in through gaps in the woven thicket above us, I took a deep breath and braced myself for the last hurdle between us and our way out.

CHAPTER TEN

The moment we stepped out of the tunnel, I bumped into my father's back. He'd come to a dead stop, and was gaping upwards.

Trepidation thrummed through me as I followed his gaze—and my own mouth dropped open.

The Summer King was blocking the sun as he hovered above us, his sun-bleached, blond hair aflame, his golden clothes floating idly around him.

"Congratulations on reaching the end of the Equinox Games."

"The end?" I couldn't stop myself from yelling up at him. "What's the trick this time? An army of dryads?"

His broad, white grin literally flashed, a stark reminder that he wasn't human. "No trick, young halfling." And that stressed that *I* wasn't entirely human—and that he knew it. He gestured around, encompassing all of us. "You *have* reached the end."

"What about Spring's trial?" Jessamine asked.

"Can you two stop looking the gift horse in the mouth?" Ella hissed. "Keep asking about the Spring part of the trials and he might just give it to you!"

"They find it suspicious, as do I," said Leander. "He could be lulling us into thinking it's over, only for some creature to burst out of the earth and attempt to drag us into its bowels—or something."

"Or nothing!" Ella cried shrilly. "The King said it's over."

"It is, fiery one," the king said, eyes literally flashing gold with amusement. "We had other prisoners picked for the challenges, but your

arrival at the cusp of the games was a sign they were meant for you. It was a most fortunate decision to let you play. You have all been the most entertaining players we've had in ages."

And we were supposed to feel thankful for that honor? Even privileged? I could now see why Leander hated and distrusted the capricious fairies with their twisted sense of fun and offhand cruelty.

With a regal flourish, the Summer King beckoned us to follow him. We exchanged uncertain glances, before we shuffled away from the protection of the tunnel. There was nothing else we could do, after all.

But as the king flew away across what had first looked like an endless empty space, it suddenly transformed into the colosseum we'd first been dragged into. It was only then that the massive crowds seemed to zoom back into existence all around and their cheering boomed. We'd been in the same place the whole time.

The others walked ahead, gaping up at the ocean of faceless spectators, leaving Leander and I at the rear. In our anticipatory silence, I could tell he too was trying to compose himself before facing the Spring Queen.

But as we finally approached the four thrones on the platform at the end of the mind-numbingly huge colosseum, my heart squeezed tighter.

Two of the thrones were empty! The crystal-blue one of Winter on the far left, and beside it, the blooming wooden one of Spring.

The Summer King lowered himself onto his coral throne to the right of the green throne, looking pleased as could be. On his left was Autumn's throne, surrounded by spiraling vines of pumpkins and squash. And sitting on it was Alan.

He was the Autumn King?

He waved cheerily at us. "Nice to see you all in one piece. I bet on it, after all."

"What do you win in this bet, I wonder," Leander said between gritted teeth, baring his fangs menacingly.

"Just the joy of being right," Alan said innocently, his grey eyes landing on my father. "You sure took your time."

If my father was confused by this statement, he didn't show it, he just kept scrutinizing Alan, looking more livid by the second. Then he suddenly barked, "Why are you sitting on that throne? Where's your mother?"

His mother? Did that mean the Autumn Queen was Alan's mother? If so, how did my father know that?

Alan waved his hands around. "Busy with our own Court's business. It's Harvest Moon, time for the bonfires and whatnot. You know how we get around that time." He then pointed at me. "Where's *her* mother?"

I recoiled, recalling the snow spirit taking her form.

My father's apparent anger was doused in a second as he looked away from him. "She's been gone for a while now."

Alan's cheeky grin vanished, his eyes becoming as wide as saucers.

Then he cleared his throat, and addressed the Summer King, "Theseus—can you give them their prizes and open the barriers for us?"

King Theseus scoffed, the weight of the moment lost on him. "Now? We just finished the games. They need to join the celebrations."

"We'll celebrate at our own Court," Alan said, rising to his feet. "But we really need to get going."

Pouting with reluctance, Theseus snapped his fingers at his attendants, who approached us with golden trays bearing an assortment of items. "What's the rush?"

Alan shrugged. "Long story. We need to get Old Man Fairborn here to my family."

"I'm not old," my father snorted, anger resurfacing. Anger that felt personal.

How did he know this man?

Alan chuckled humorlessly. "Tell that to your grey hair. You wouldn't have gotten that or those lines on your face had you and Belaina stayed."

My father shook his head. "Staying wasn't an option for a pair like us."

Alan jumped off the towering platform, landing in front of us in that magical grace he'd displayed when he'd kidnapped me off the streets. "Tell that to the brother you left behind."

My brows rose of their own accord at the mention of my ghost of an uncle. I turned to my father. "You left him here?"

He stalled his answer as he accepted his offered tray, bearing a purple, leather tool belt. He opened one pocket and stuck his arm down to the shoulder, when it looked like it could barely accommodate his hand. He huffed. "That would come in handy stashing away endless tools."

"Dad!"

He winced at my exasperated tone. “Depends on your definition of ‘leave.’”

“What did we say about you being vague?” I growled.

“Sorry, sorry.” But he still didn’t answer as he stepped aside to make way for Clancy and Jessamine to receive their prizes—a crimson, leather-bound book and a rose-gold tiara, respectively. If they were magical too, there was no clear evidence of that as with my father’s prize.

Clancy beat Jessamine to her tray, tucking the tiara into his bag. “I’ll carry this for you.”

“Can’t I at least hold it?” She wiggled with frustration. “I’ve never been near something so precious in my life.”

He nodded placatingly. “We don’t know what magic this thing has, and I don’t want you to risk anything before we’re safely out of here.”

As they continued to argue, my father nudged Ella ahead to receive her prize. “Go on.”

A fairy in a sparkling powder-blue dress, with her white hair arranged in complicated braids over her head, offered her a pair of high-heeled slippers. And they looked made of glass! They caught the light of Summer at every angle, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow in a dazzling display.

Hands clenched up against her chest, Ella glanced around, as if wary of an attack. “Do these come with any deals or trades or anything?”

Alan reached to tap her shoulder but she jumped away from him with a gasp. His lips twisted. “I promise you, yours is a pure, shenanigan-free gift, sanctioned by the King of Winter himself.”

She scowled at him, distrustful. “Are you sure?”

Alan stared down at her dully. “Trust me, His Frigidity has no sense of humor. Now take the ridiculous shoes. May they carry you through many a night of prancing and dancing.”

Keeping her eyes on him the entire time as if to guard against any sudden moves, Ella snatched the glass slippers off the tray and retreated behind Leander.

“These are courtesy of the Queen of Spring,” Alan told us, bowing sarcastically to introduce the gifts carried by a boy in a green silk suit with sandy curls. “No hogging, they’re meant to be shared.”

If the significance of Ella’s crystal pumps was lost on me, then the pair of silver hand-mirrors we were offered baffled me even further.

Leander and I reached out at the same time, our hands colliding. My heart skipped a beat, and not just from seeing the new difference between us.

Ducking his head, he offered for me to go first. I picked up my mirror, turning it between my fingers, watching the light catch on its fine etchings and the engravings of roses and their leaves on the back.

I looked at my reflection, seeing it clearly for the first time. My hair was a more vivid color, a warmer tone, halfway to Clancy's bright auburn, and my eyes were practically glowing. With the sharpening of all my features and my bone structure, the skin that stretched across it shone with a pearlescent sheen.

I tried to remember where I'd recently seen someone with this type of dewy, ethereal skin as Leander raised his mirror to Alan, a dark look crossing his face. "What do we do with these? I came here to talk to the Spring Queen, not be reminded of what I've become. The King said we'd have a magical gift to ask of any of the monarchs present."

"And as you can see, only one King is present, presently." Alan tossed his head up at the Summer King, who was now addressing the crowds, forgetting all about us. "And each of you *did* get a magical gift."

I felt my heart drop into my gut in crushing disappointment. We'd have no wish answered. It had all been for nothing.

Leander, clearly as agitated as I was, forced his back to straighten so he could glower directly into Alan's eyes. "We almost die over and over in your cruel games, only to be awarded these trivial prizes?"

"These mirrors aren't just meant for you to stress over your own vanity." Unperturbed by Leander's menace, Alan clucked his tongue, jokingly chiding him. "They offer peeks into other places, show you who or what you wish to see."

Neither of us wasted a second in testing it. We pounced on our mirrors, our commands of "Show me Fairuza!" and "Where is Adelaide?" colliding.

Each mirror flashed a blinding light in our faces, their reflective faces swirling like miniature portals until an image began to take form.

What I saw made all air flee my body.

Adelaide and Fairuza were running through dimly lit, ancient-looking stone halls before climbing waist-high steps as they fled a mob of pale, deformed creatures which had spindly limbs, massive heads, and no eyes,

their faces half-filled with gaping, fang-filled mouths. Adelaide was at the front, dragging Fairuza behind her, both barefoot.

Leander gripped my shoulder, turning me to face his own mirror. “I think I found your friend!”

I swallowed, my mouth dryer than the sun-baked concrete beneath our feet. “And I found your sister!”

Shaken, his eyes slowly turned back to his own mirror, putting it right alongside mine as we watched identical scenes play out.

The last thing we saw before the mirrors flashed back to reflecting us, was Adelaide tackling Fairuza into a seemingly fathomless pool of dark water to escape the creatures.

Fright overtook any confusion, and I shook the mirror frenziedly, knocking on it, trying to make it resume its transmission. “Why won’t it work?”

“These are small mirrors that will only show you a glimpse at a time,” explained Alan. “You can always try again later.”

“Later when?” Leander rumbled like an enraged beast as he shook his mirror in Alan’s face. “I want to know what’s happening *now*. *Is* this happening now?”

Alan nodded. “Those mirrors show what you ask of it. You asked to see your loved ones in the present.”

Leander grabbed Alan by his flamboyant jacket. “Where are they and what were those things?”

Alan jumped back effortlessly out of Leander’s reach. “How should I know?”

“But you must know where the Spring Queen is,” I gritted, livid at her absence and at the state I’d found my friend in. “We came here for her, specifically!”

“She just packed up her trial and left,” said King Theseus as he floated down to stand before us, pointing up to the empty thrones. “If you require an audience with her, you might try to catch up with her, before she returns to her abode.” His grin widened. “You would fail, of course, and have to face the perils of going through Autumn then Winter to get to her.”

So that was what pleased him so much. The idea of us in more danger.

Our hoped-for shortcut had disappeared with that elusive queen. Now it was back to our original plan, taking the longest and evidently dangerous way to Spring.

“And off we go!” Alan skipped ahead, ruffling Ella’s hair as he went, earning himself a defensive swipe. Cackling deviously, he gestured for us to follow him, leading us out of the colosseum in an exaggerated march. Leander and I shared a look, and though he looked as furious and distraught as I was, he spun his finger near his temple and crossed his eyes. A hysterical giggle bubbled through my distress and escaped me in a snort.

Once outside the palace, the rest of the walled city was an almost blinding sight, its houses reflecting the unending day’s light. Its narrow roads wound down past kiosks selling everything from mountains of colorful spices to elaborate textiles that reminded me of the huge Cahramani carpet at the ground floor of Rosemead Castle.

“Where do you think they are?” I huddled by Leander, limping with the settling pain of my assortment of bruises as we took a long slope down to a lower part of the city.

“Somewhere in Sunstone, I think,” he said, frustration and concern smothering his tone.

“And Sunstone is…?”

“The capital of Cahraman.”

I would have never guessed the witch had taken Ada to the other end of the Folkshore. And for her to end up where Leander’s sister was, that was another level of bafflement.

Clancy’s horns appeared between us. “On the bright side, you know where they both are now.”

“You can check up on them again as soon as the mirrors allow it,” Jessamine added, lips trembling on an attempt at a comforting smile. “From what you’ve told me about your friend, I’m sure you have nothing to worry about. And after we’re done here, the Master can tell his relatives in Cahraman to return her to you.”

I again tried to ask the mirror to show me Adelaide and Fairuza. It stubbornly insisted on reflecting my own altered face back at me.

Taking one last, longing look at it, I tucked it into my bag beside the rose jar.

“You’re right. I have to trust that Ada can take care of herself.” I was trying to reassure myself more than anything, since there was nothing any of us could do about it now.

I found Leander gazing at me with dread filling his eyes. “Do you think she can watch out for my sister too, in whatever situation they’re in?”

“I *know* she can.” I set an urgent hand on his arm, hoping to soothe his worries about what we’d seen, and about what we were heading off to achieve. “Ada is the most enterprising and capable person I know. And as soon as we can, we’ll find a way to help them both. Now we need to save our stamina for finding that queen, and breaking your curse.”

He turned his hand up to show me his palm. “I hope we find her fast, because I don’t only feel my body changing even more quickly, I feel my senses warping.”

Impulsively, I slid my hand into his, threading my fingers through his. Their harder bones and tougher ligaments created an unyielding curve, but I still gave him the tightest squeeze I could. “We’ll find her, even if it means cornering and questioning everyone that could have spotted her along the way.”

Though his eyes remained morose, his tone lightened up as he said wryly, “That’s a lot of people to pester.”

I attempted a teasing smile. “I am nothing, if not persistent.”

His gaze grew darker, his voice losing any brightness. “I don’t know if I’m worth all this effort. You really didn’t need to put yourself through all we’ve encountered, just to aid me in what could very well be a fruitless endeavor.”

“It’d be awfully ironic if our springtime destination was fruitless,” I said, persisting in my efforts to lighten the mood.

That earned me a rumbling chuckle from him, the sound alone making my heart flutter. But the fact that I’d succeeded in making him feel the slightest bit better made it soar.

Suddenly, Leander started as my father and Ella passed us, and dropped my hand as if it burned him.

A stain of disappointment spread within me, clutching my throat closed.

I knew how he felt about fairies. But now that he knew I’d been almost in the dark about my truth, he couldn’t still be upset with me, could he? Or did my new, true form make him uncomfortable? He’d as good as confessed that he had feelings for me, before he’d pushed me into the

portal. Did he change his mind about me? What could I do to change it back? What if I couldn't?

But—why was I so upset by this? We were at least still friends, weren't we?

Uncertainty and dejection raked their talons across my heart, making me question if that was still all I wanted.

I knew now that I liked him, cared for him. No, I more than cared for him.

Would whatever this budding feeling was, if it was love, break the curse, and save us the trouble of seeking out the Spring Queen?

Or would it not be enough, as everything from me usually wasn't?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A loud clap dragged my attention back ahead and to our surroundings.

It was Alan's hand landing on my father's back in a playful slap, who irritably tore his hand away. I was thinking this was so unlike my father—before amending the thought, that it seemed I didn't know much about him after all—when we reached the end of the slope and wound down to a dock by a bright-green river. Sleek fishing boats that looked as if made from silk, and a barge that felt spun from light were moored facing a marina with an otherworldly fish market and restaurants teeming with breathtaking fairies. Across from them, shops gleamed with an enormous array of jewelry and artifacts, crawling with shoppers decked in vibrant garments and elaborate ornaments.

Leander suddenly said, "Do we have to go to Autumn? Can't we go to Spring? Have the exits between Courts changed, or are we taking the barge directly out of here?" my father asked Alan.

"You think a place as lazy as Summer has bothered to evolve its layout in the past few centuries?" Alan scoffed.

To our collective shock, my father reached out and gripped Alan's ear, shaking his entire head by it. "If I wanted a snarky retort from you, I would have asked for one."

Alan laughed, ducking out from my father's hold. "Noted. Lead the way then." He wiggled his eyebrows. "*If* you remember it—old man."

"That's it! How do you two know each other?" I waved my finger between them.

Alan avoided answering me by jumping to the far end of the barge.

My father looked sheepish. “It’s a bit of a long story, one that requires a sit-down when we reach Autumn.”

I knew him well enough to know more questions wouldn’t yield answers right now, and that I’d have to wait. But at least I now knew I would get answers soon.

As soon as we boarded the barge, Ella immediately started circling the deck, excited to explore. Then the barge set off down the river.

In minutes, it passed under a sprawling bridge that shaded us, revealing that the water glowed softly. It sailed downstream, gliding so smoothly I wouldn’t have known we were moving if the city wasn’t quickly dwindling in the distance.

Jessamine fluttered across the deck to perch by me on the rim of the boat, examining our surroundings with an air of disappointment.

“What?” I finally asked her.

“Nothing.” A beat of silence, then she sighed. “I just expected things to be a tad more—magical, you know?” She waved a hand around, half her wing rising with it. “I thought we’d go down the river on the back of a giant crocodile or something, like those illustrations from Gemisht.”

“What’s a crocodile?”

She turned to blink at me. “It’s like a bigger, saltwater alligator.”

“Uh…what’s an alligator?”

She faced me, her cheeks wobbling with incoming laughter, and the memory of a similar conversation between us assailed me. Back when I’d wanted to get as far away as I could from Leander and had refused to leave the room he had given me, with her assigned as my caretaker.

One of my first discussions with Leander had been spawned by her telling me of mammoths and elephants. He’d shown me a souvenir in the shape of the latter before our tentative encounter had ended in disaster, with him losing his temper and me fleeing away in fright and desperation. It seemed she remembered that time as clearly as I did.

Leander came to stand beside me, folding his arms over the edge to take in the now faraway shoreline of the city. “You might be more familiar with the term ‘wyrm.’”

A wyrm, as far as I knew, was a sea serpent. “You mean like that thing that almost gobbled me up in the water?”

“Nooo! It’s not a serpent, it’s more like—” Jessamine motioned around her face, sketching a long snout with sharp teeth all around its edges, “—

that, and they have thick tails, and these weird flippers."

"Feet," said Leander. "They have clawed feet, like a lizard."

She squinted thoughtfully. "Why would a sea creature have feet instead of flippers?"

"Because they're commonly found in rivers, not seas," he said dryly.

"So it's a water dragon?" I summed up.

"No," they both said in unison.

"No fire-breath?"

They shared a contemplative look.

"Do water dragons breathe fire?" Leander wondered, more to himself than to us. "Seems a little pointless if they do, with all the water and cold, and such."

"Who knows?" I said.

Jessamine shot off into the air, raining small orange feathers down on us, making Leander jerk back in alarm. "Clancy! Do water dragons breathe fire or do they have ice-breath?"

She landed by him, and I watched them launch into discussion, either about the functionality of sea dragons' breath, or about something they didn't want us eavesdropping on.

Watching their spontaneous intimacy was heartwarming. For three years since the curse had hit them, they'd tiptoed around each other, sneaking conversations whenever they found a moment to be alone, caring about each other hopelessly, and doing a terrible job of pretending otherwise. But after the ordeals we'd shared, and now we weren't in the confines of the castle among the people they knew, they were without fear of being caught or judged, or separated.

Next moment, my heart slowed in dejection as I considered that this leap in their relationship might only be a desperate impulse. If they were losing hope in breaking the curse, they might now believe themselves to be at death's door, and had nothing to lose.

Looking away from them, I found my father talking to Alan, who continued to behave with that curiosity-inflaming level of familiarity towards him.

Alan *had* been acting as if he knew him from the start. But it had only been when my father had seen him sitting in the Autumn Queen's throne that he appeared to recognize him too. So what did that mean? Had he

forgotten meeting him when he'd last been here, when he'd met my mother…?

My mother. I really couldn't wrap my head around her being a fairy.

If she was part of this race of magical beings, how could she have tolerated leaving this land for ours? To be stuck in a dreary town at the end of a world without magic, cut off from the rest of humanity and fair-folk alike, and to eventually die there?

Unease tightened my skin, as I clawed at my faded memories of her last days, sick and confined to her bed. There was an array of diseases that killed thousands every year, from infants to the elderly. But what could have afflicted her?

What could have taken someone like her, who should have had power and longevity, away from us, and so prematurely?

My father had mentioned she'd left Faerie to avoid something—or someone—very powerful. Had it been someone similar to the woman Adelaide's mother had been escaping? But what witch or other magical being could scare a fairy, and that much?

"Bonnie?"

My lashes fluttered as I came back to myself. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I found our wyrm."

With a few rousing blinks, I realized my meandering thoughts had consumed more of our trip than I'd noticed and the city had totally disappeared in the horizon. I found myself leaning against Leander, who'd pulled his now shaggy hair up away from a face shining with sweat from the unyielding sun above. And it felt so natural, so comforting to be this near to him.

But when I followed his gaze I found the towns we'd been passing had been traded for wetlands, surrounded by a dense forest of short trees, with half of it rooted in the murky water.

"Is this a marsh?" I asked.

"Not exactly, but that—" He pointed down at the water by our barge, "—is a crocodile."

I looked down so fast I nearly tipped myself into the river.

Swimming lazily by us was a huge, scaly, lizard-like creature, its tail alone as long as my new, taller body. Its friends must have joined us because I heard a variety of reactions from around the barge. Clancy was

trying to convince Jessamine, “Do not to attempt to ride it like a log in a lake!”

The crocodile below us swam off, heading into the flooded woods, leaving a trail of ripples in its wake. It reminded me of all the things I had wanted to see and learn about, back when leaving the borders of my town had been a far-fetched dream.

Now I was in Faerie, confirmed to be half-fey myself, with us having deadly encounters with magical creatures and sailing a sparkling current with a fairy guide. It made seeing such an animal not as exciting as it once could have been.

I couldn’t believe I’d just thought that. I used to think the prospect of visiting a lake to go fishing and see the swans exciting. Now, anything less than the sea serpent Leander had defeated felt anti-climactic.

I sighed. “This place might just ruin everything else for me.”

He frowned down at me. “Why’s that?”

“Just a silly feeling.” I waved it off. “So, if this isn’t a marsh, what is it?”

Alan had arrived soundlessly, setting his head on my shoulder. “This ugly, soggy bog is a swamp. But don’t worry, you won’t have to look at it long. We’re closing in on Autumn’s edge.”

Leander pushed Alan’s face off my shoulder. “Who are you again?”

“Not that I told you more than my name to begin with, but I figured that taking my mother’s place as representative of our Court, and sitting *on a throne* next to Summer, would have answered that question for you. But I suppose I can’t expect too much from your hairy head.” Alan’s snark earned him an aggravated snarl from Leander. “But to be clear enough for your Shagginess, I am, in fact, the Prince of the Autumn Court.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “If you are, why did you snatch me off the street and throw me in a cell? I thought you were a guard.”

“Would you believe me if I said it was for a laugh?”

I hoped my glare would be halfway intimidating, with my bigger, sharper features.

He withstood our seething annoyance for a moment, before flinging his head back and cracking up. “Fine, fine, those guards were assigned to me from Summer, to keep an eye on me while giving me a tour of the Court. That was when they came upon you, and I decided to intervene and make it easier for all of you.”

“Easier?” I cried out. “I almost died of fright fearing you’d drop me!”

He waved. “Fear not, I wouldn’t have dropped you even if my fingers were covered in grease. And I gave you an aerial tour of the city as we got to your cell, so, you’re welcome.” Before I could protest his weird fairy logic, he reached out to scratch under Leander’s chin. “I knew where to take you since they showed me the cells earlier, and I had a nice, long chat with dog-boy.”

Leander snapped his jaws at Alan’s hand, making him retreat with blurring speed. “More like he talked at me for two hours, asking an endless amount of stupid questions.”

Alan’s grin only widened. “You expect me to meet a satyr and a wolf-man and not be curious about what they are, and what they’re doing trying to sneak into our realm?”

I tapped him, securing his attention, asking the question I actually cared about again. “And how do you know my father?”

“Pfft, ask him yourself.” Alan stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Seamus! What kind of father are you to keep your daughter in such suspense?”

As my father approached with a scowl that said he’d gladly strangle him, the barge docked roughly, making us all stumble forward.

Gone was the wetland, and in its place was a crystal-clear river bordered by rocky banks. Massive trees towered beyond and into the distance, most transforming into fall foliage.

We soon disembarked onto a sprawling, grey, lumber dock, with Alan skipping ahead to a path that led up and through the woods.

Clearly the most excited among us, Jessamine took off, shooting for the trees with Clancy trying to keep up beneath her.

Ella held up the rear, twitchy, eyes snatching glimpses in every direction. “We’re not going to be welcomed by another inside-out centaur are we?”

“The danger in this area is the dryads,” my father said. “Those nymphs have sticky fingers.”

I sidled up to him and Alan. “Sticky with tree sap?”

He huffed a chuckle. “Considering where they come from, most probably. But I meant that they’re a thieving lot, among other kinds of cruel mischief.”

I took that as my opening to sharply jab Alan in the side, earning a satisfying yelp. My unbefitting revenge for almost stopping my heart, jumping among roofs, chucking me in a cell, then tossing me in those games where I'd almost met my end a half-dozen different ways.

I glowered at him, then my father. "Again, how do you know this nutter?"

"This idiot right here—" My father exhaled heavily as he returned Alan's earlier clap on the shoulder, almost hard enough to knock him over, "—is your cousin."

CHAPTER TWELVE

It seemed I'd expended my capacity for being stunned.

I met my father's revelation with a simple, "Uh—sure."

When I said nothing more, my mind totally stalled, my father seemed relieved, turned, and followed Alan. I followed the rest in a daze as they trudged through the winding path.

Unlike the horror-laced sample of Autumn in the games, this woodsy part of the actual Court was calm and peaceful, and bathed in a cloudy afternoon glow. I was at once dizzy with the implications of that obnoxious imp being my cousin, and spellbound by our surroundings.

Tall, dense trees with glittering crimson and vermillion leaves and sienna and indigo trunks whispered an indecipherable language all around us, their branches home to a breathtaking array of birds and reptiles of all sizes and hues. Paths that wound between the thinner trees opened suddenly ahead, with fairy children running among them with baskets perched on their heads, their joyous giggling joining the melody of burbling water and birdsong. I caught glimpses of them as they rushed past, all with chestnut and auburn hair, in sturdy brown coats, their baskets full of miniature pumpkins, pearlescent turnips, and silver potatoes.

I was walking along a stone path set in a shallow, rushing creek and gaping at the amazing produce when I stumbled—and leapt ahead blindly to avoid falling. Instead of dropping into the creek and breaking something, I flew up in an arc and landed, instinctively, gracefully, on a stone step, three steps ahead of my intended landing.

I let out a shaky huff and squeaked, "Did you see that?"

"That? That's nothing!" Alan scoffed.

And to prove his point, he bounced off each stone, barely touching any, almost flying from one to the other.

Show off. I couldn't believe the day I found a relative, it would be him.

"So, this is a fairy thing?" Leander appeared beside me. He had given up on the dry path that was rocky and dusty, now walked through the water, the legs of his pants rolled up.

"Probably. I did jump through the trees when the knuckelavee was chasing me, but I thought it was mostly because of the panic."

"You think you've always had the ability, but it was suppressed too?"

"I don't know, I wasn't given a chance to try anything, really. So it might have always been there." With that, I gave my father a pointed a glare.

He avoided my gaze with a pained grimace, before continuing to trade whispers with Clancy. From a few words I caught, he seemed to be promising him something once we reached my uncle.

My uncle! That was yet another thing I had no idea how to handle. Not only had my mother been a fairy, who'd chosen to live and die on the forgotten edge of the Folkshore, but my missing uncle had been in Faerie all that time. And he seemed to have married one of its queens, no less.

Even more implications crashed through my mind. I could have been spending every holiday with royal, fairy relatives by simply going through the Hornswoods. I could have had a family all this time, known who I was, what I was. I could have grown up here alongside Alan, as loony and infuriating as he was. All my father's efforts to prevent my exposure to our human neighbors would have been needless.

Why had my mother chosen this isolation for me?

"Bonnie," Leander whispered intensely. "Look!"

I found him pointing down to a lower level of the path. I couldn't see from my position. He reached back, making a hurrying gesture, and unthinking, I leapt up, almost weightless, softly landing on his back, gripping his shoulders to lean over and follow his line of sight.

A doe was walking below us, literally golden fur shimmering in the indirect light pouring from among the towering grove of trees.

"It's so beautiful," I gasped, heart fluttering. "Do you think I can pet it?"

"Unlikely. Deer are just as skittish as your friend." He side-swept his gaze to Ella as he continued walking at its pace, amazingly silent, as if he

was really turning into a predator. And he seemed totally unfazed by my presence on his back. Maybe he was getting used to the idea of my being a fairy? Was he remembering *who* I was, independent of *what* I was?

He added, “Although, if you’re anything like our guide, you could be fast enough to chase after it.”

“I’d like to try, but I don’t want to scare it!”

He looked back, his eyes filling with a fondness that spread a jittery warmth in my chest as he chuckled. “Your kindness seems at odds with your desire for fun.”

“It’s not fun if it’s at the expense of something else’s suffering; then it’s sadism.”

His eyes suddenly dimmed. “Do you think the Spring Queen is having fun at our expense? She knew we were there in Summer, and she took off early. Maybe she realized why we came, and decided to force us to chase her, making it even harder for us.”

I had no reassuring answer for him. The fairy monarchs had put us through the wringer for their and thousands of other fairies’ entertainment. It wasn’t far-fetched that the Spring Queen would do the same again. We had come to the conclusion that his parents had left out a part of the story of why she’d cursed him and Fairuza. But there was still no excuse for cursing babies. And now I’d been exposed to fairy logic, she might have done it for no other reason but vicious amusement.

I tried to get off his back, but he reached back and held on to my legs, urging me to remain, whispering gruffly, “You might be able to leap higher than that deer, might recuperate faster than mere humans now, but you’re still bruised and in pain. Rest and enjoy the scenery.”

Immensely grateful for his consideration, and enjoying his nearness too much to end it, I sighed and clung to his neck more securely.

He stepped out of the creek and up through a shallow part of the riverbank, heading up stone steps emerging from the damp earth, curling up to the woods. Now I wasn’t preoccupied with where I was treading, I took a better look around.

Deeper in the woods, I saw houses that seemed to be not built, but sprouting naturally up from the ground. In their yards, giant rabbits ran alongside children like dogs, and velvet-smooth roads connected them, each bordered by translucent boulders that gleamed like glass. We soon

turned to a cliff that connected to a bridge made of malleable, faceted crystal and intertwined, gleaming roots.

Crossing the bridge, I found us above a mirror-like river, the source of the creek. It reflected the sky above, making me feel like we were leagues up in the sky, caught between pink-tinged clouds.

“Surreal,” I whispered, before I noticed the water reflecting something gliding above us, soon followed by a slew of others.

It was Jessamine! She was flying ahead, attended by a squadron of red birds!

“Do they think I’m their mother?”

Her voice echoed down to us, spurring a domino of laughter from Alan at the front, to Ella as she brought up the rear.

“They’re not in a line like ducklings, so no,” yelled Clancy so she could hear him. “It’s as if they’re escorting you, like courtiers.”

“He means they think you’re the queen of the birds,” Leander elaborated. “The bigger you are, the more they’ll assume you’re in charge.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked him.

“People didn’t dub me King of the Beasts in all their far-flung rumors for nothing,” he huffed mournfully. “I swear, if I get any bigger I’ll find nothing to wear.”

“Use a bed sheet,” I suggested teasingly. “Cut holes in it for your head and arms.”

Ella appeared by us, wearing her glass slippers on her hands. “Better yet, put it over your head and go around scaring people.”

He scowled down at her. “Are you implying I’m not scary enough?”

Ella shrugged. “Now that I’ve seen enough of you, you’re far preferable to my stepmother—even before she turned to an ogre.”

“What is she, really?” I asked her. “How did they end up in our town?”

A shudder tore through her. “Don’t know. Don’t want to know.”

At the end of the bridge, Alan stood grinning. “If you want to dress Fang Face up as a ghost, you’ll have to wait until the bonfire night of our celebrations.”

That piqued my interest. “You do that here too? Wear scary masks and dance around the fire?”

Alan wiggled an eyebrow at me as he hurried us along. “Where do you think your lot got the idea from?”

“It’s our tradition in the first night of Saint Alban’s festival,” I said. “At the start of summer.”

Leander chuckled, the rumble shaking his body beneath me. “I told you that Mad Alberic was no saint.”

“Oh, are people still talking about that man in your land?” Alan blew air through closed lips, fluttering them like a horse. “He dumped all your ancestors at the end of the human world for the chance to get a place in the Winter Court. And that festival is meant to be celebrated in autumn, not summer.”

On the list of revelations that rearranged my life, that one had to be on the low end. Leander and I had already had a discussion about the man I’d grown up believing to be the savior of our ancestors, leading them to our cut-off island to escape some sun god’s wrath. Over the centuries the story had become a folktale, almost deifying the man we called Saint Alban.

Current outlook taken into account, I would call him worse things than mad. Because if my bloodline had remained in Arbore, I would have had a totally different life…

…or I wouldn’t exist at all. Since my parents met because my father had gone through the Hornswoods. Not to mention, their presence near them had been how my and Adelaide’s mothers had met. Which had later led to Ada traveling up Ericura looking for us. And celebrating Saint Alban’s festival had been what, inadvertently, led to me meeting Leander. And for all that, I could no longer wish I’d had a different life.

Resting on his back, I draped my arms around him, hugging him in lieu of a better hold, looking over his shoulders as we approached a place that took my breath away.

A marble-white path stretched beyond the bridge, bordered by tall, slim, silver trees with gleaming burgundy starburst leaves. High between them hovered pumpkins of every possible color, with sinister, grinning faces carved on them, their spooky light illuminating the way.

Alan cupped his hands around his mouth and mimicked a trumpet, scaring off Jessamine’s birds. “All along the Pumpkin Path.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It felt as if the very soul of Autumn encompassed us as we traversed said Pumpkin Path.

The pale golden sunlight, the silvery wisps of fog curling at our heels, the crispy, bronzed-ruby leaves twirling past us and the dried, jeweled petals that followed them on a woodsy breeze—everything reminded me of the season back home.

But the eerie whispers in the wind, the sounds of chattering things crawling in the earth, and unseen wings flapping in the shadows, set a richer, preternatural tone. Along with the sparkling spider webs stretching between branches, and the peculiar sights of impossible fauna and flora I caught between the trees, those were uniquely of this Court. And we were on a one-way road to the seat of its queen. Alan's mother. My father's sister-in-law.

My aunt.

All this tangled information made me feel as if my head was filling with straw, like that scarecrow we were approaching.

As his squash patch came into view, a part of me forgot what lay ahead, wanting to go tap pumpkins and gourds alike, as I had while flitting through the market back home, checking the seasonal produce.

As if warning me off that thought, the scarecrow jerked, turning its pumpkin head carved full of jagged teeth to face me, making me jump.

"Is that thing alive?" I squeaked.

Jessamine dropped out of the air, hobbling like a giant hawk. "You saw it move, too?"

Leander followed our gaze. "Huh, *there's* a way to outsmart the crows."

Though we had passed it, I could still see the head of the scarecrow rotating to watch us.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I visited the Granary, our biggest farming region—”

“The one where the tall girl knocked you out for being a jerk?”

He tensed beneath me, curved back further hunching, his voice deepening in chagrin. “She knocked me *down*, not out. And my point was, one of their complaints was that their field pests were getting smarter and figuring out that the stone figures of gorgons and satyrs weren’t really a threat, and weren’t doing much to scare them off anymore.”

I blinked at him before he turned his head forward, a frown knotting his bushy eyebrows. “What’s a gorgon?”

Jessamine splayed all her fingers around her head, wiggling them while hissing with her tongue out. “These Orestian demons with snakes for hair. I hear they turn whoever sees them to stone.”

“If everyone who saw them turned to stone, how do we know what they look like?”

“It’s only if they see you, and if you make eye contact.” Clancy joined us, also spooked by the sentient scarecrow. “Miss Quill, remember that picture book I lent you about the *Trials of Hemitheon*?”

“Oh, the one where he defeated the gorgon by making it look at its own reflection?”

He grinned, clearly pleased she remembered. “Yes, in his shield. Legend has it that very gorgon, now petrified, stands guard outside the palace of the King of Orestia.”

“It doesn’t. I’ve been there,” said Leander. “The story they told me there was that he tricked it into fighting him at night, while watching it in the reflection of his shield. Once it was close enough, he closed his eyes and spun in a swing, beheading it.”

Ella popped up by Jessamine, startling us all. “What happened to its head?”

I could hear the confusion in Clancy’s voice. “Its…head?”

She rolled her shoulders. “My mother told me a story like that, except she called it Hema the Hero, a common folktale where she was from in the South of Ericura. She said he kept the snake-woman’s head and used it to turn his adversaries to stone.”

That just added to my theory about the population of our island. If the North was settled by Arboreans, then the South was full of partly Orestians, and mostly Campanians. Adelaide had described the Southerners' difference in culture and appearance, saying they were harder, louder, and darker, if none as dark as she was.

But now I knew her mother had possibly been from Cahraman. I first made the connection when I'd seen the painting of Leander's family in the castle, and noticed his mother had similar features and coloring to Ada. Back then, the observation had made little sense. But with the new context I'd obtained since entering Faerie, it was the only answer.

The idea was still hard to swallow, that her mother had been a witch, and mine had been a fairy, and we'd both been completely ignorant of those facts. If her mother hadn't been as secretive as my parents, and Ada had known we were both half-magical, our confrontation with that witch might have gone differently. Now we were not only separated across the world, but across realms.

I sighed miserably, sagging further against Leander, watching the scenes change between the trees, along with the lights coming through their gaps. They shifted softly like shimmering caresses all over us as the coral sun lowered across its violet sky. The days here were far shorter than I had anticipated, but I tried not to think of the rose in my bag.

"Tell me more about this Hema the Hero," I said, watching farmers load produce into carts, each dragged by winged horses, reminding me of the one Leander had painted and hung in the tea room. "It's so interesting hearing how one story differs from one land to the next."

Leander leaned forward, offering me a better look at a pegasus as it took flight, a display of such speed and grace that didn't even rustle its cart. "Well, he was supposedly a half-god, and his flying steed was called Agrippus."

"Yes, he was the son of their head god…Tireias?" Jessamine looked to Clancy, who nodded his agreement.

"Tinheas!" Ella blurted out as she skipped ahead. Excitement shone in her clear eyes, when I'd only ever seen them subdued and miserable and, as of late, dilated with defensive panic. But she seemed almost happy now, to have prospects, to have something to say, to be part of a conversation with a group. I knew I would be, if I had been forcibly isolated from everyone for years, under the thrall of those who abused and enslaved me.

As upset with my father as I was for keeping me in the dark all these years, he had his reasons, however pointless I found them to be. But Lord Dufreyne had no excuse for what he'd let his daughter be subjected to.

"They do call him Tinheas there," Leander agreed with Ella. "Whenever those in the Granary got angry, they'd wish for one of his lightning-bolts to hit whatever upset them, be it a person, a pest, or a rock they tripped over."

Ella threw her hands up, eyes closed as in prayer. "Almighty Lord Tinheas, smite this pebble, for I have found it in my shoe, and it was a mighty nuisance!"

None of us could help laughing at that. Her eyes only flew to each of us, shy, disbelieving. But it seemed she decided we were laughing at what she'd said, not at her, as a tentative, but pleased, smile cracked her worried face.

"So, the one common part between different versions of the story is that Hema was half god, half mortal?" I said.

"Is it even possible for such a thing to exist?" Clancy wondered aloud.

"I have a fairy halfling on my back," Leander deadpanned, though that humor I'd come to crave permeated his voice. "I don't see why not half-gods, considering we always hear stories of men marrying selkies and nymphs."

"Yes, but gods don't marry mortal women," Jessamine mumbled in a far less enthused voice. "Just like lords don't marry maids."

Leander had once told me it was far more likely for women to marry werewolves and men to marry selkies than it was for a peasant to marry a noble. And though they were less guarded about their feelings here—their transformations didn't bring them any closer in status.

My light mood extinguished and its remnant smoke disappeared among the thickening fog, I looked ahead as our path wound down, our glowing destination becoming clearer.

With my father and cousin silhouetted against the warm hues of light, I had to wonder about the marriages Seamus and Ossian Fairborn had made, and what had made one couple escape to the human world, while the other remained here.

Dwelling on marriage politics led to a pinch of despondency that I couldn't ignore.

If we did break the curse, and Leander returned home a young man, a reinstated Crown Prince of Arbore, what would happen to us?

And when had I started thinking of our situation as an “Us?” As far as our expectations went, I was here to help, and get answers. After that…

There would be no ‘after.’

The pins pricking my heart became as thick and sharp as our poker, pressing steadily, threatening to pierce it.

I wasn’t just a peasant, but half of me was the very thing he and his family despised. Even if I was willing to be crushed back under a glamor, my true nature would never be acceptable to them.

Perhaps my growing feelings for him weren’t such a relief. At least, not to me. If I truly did love him, and it did break his curse, it would never be enough to overcome their prejudices or fulfill his expectations.

If Clancy, a mere duke, had been forced to become betrothed to a woman he barely liked or knew, then what hope did a future king have?

In spite of everything, the urge to tell him of my changing emotions grew with every second. What stopped me was the reality of the curse remaining intact. It still didn’t consider what I felt for him true love. No matter how I felt, if I said anything now, he’d only think it empty words.

The first plan was the right one. The Spring Queen herself was the only way out of this situation. Anything after that could wait.

As we reached the woods’ threshold, I tapped Leander gently on the shoulder. He let me down as reluctantly as I hopped off his back.

We gazed at each other, our eyes almost on the same level now, with him so hunched and me much taller. The moment was full and aching, before I tore my gaze away and rushed to join my father ahead, my insides vibrating with a jumble of longing, dread, frustration, and anticipation.

Our destination spread ahead, a city of close-set wooden houses arranged in neat rows, with triangular, tiled roofs, painted the deep green of an acorn squash or the warm orange of a pumpkin, with brilliant gold outlining their facades. All nestled by trees of oak, chestnut, and beech, their leaves yellowing, with the russet and caramel-colored ones scattered on the ground.

We walked until we ascended a hill overlooking the city center, where a sprawling, red-brick manor crouched like a massive, sleeping dragon. Smoke gently spiraled from its multiple chimneys and flickering lights danced in its peaked windows. Crimson and cream clay engravings and

sculptures adorned its exterior—geometric renderings of varying leaves and lifelike statues of giant, antlered rabbits, watchful owls with hooved legs, and upright bears with lion manes and tails.

We crossed the expansive square in its grounds. It had a massive circular pit in its center, piled with wood, and filled with wicker figures—the elements of a bonfire, just like back home.

Taking in every detail, I was spellbound, even though there was no overt magic in the setting. If I didn't look closely for the moving sculptures or the ground glowing under our every step, without the willowy, pointy-eared citizens with their peculiar pets and the frightful decorations outside their homes, I would have thought this a normal town in the middle of Arbore.

But surprisingly, finding the Autumn Queen's abode to be this manor instead of a majestic castle was not disappointing. The magic might be subtle, but it could be felt. In every single inch and breath. In the spread of ease within me. And in the warmth emanating from open homes and small campfires, and the shop windows that flickered to life as if to welcome us.

Now warm, comforting scents wafted to join the earthen magic, those of mixed spices and baking pastries in red-brick or scented-wood ovens, of brewing ciders mingling with the raw earth beneath us, no concrete, no stone.

Just being here, where all these elements intersected, I felt nostalgic for things I'd never known—chilly nights with a big, raucous family, roasting nuts in the roaring fireplace, and enjoying the reprieve from sweltering summery days before winter came crashing in.

I stopped, threw my head back, and spread my arms, drinking in every iota of my surroundings.

Ella stopped by me, watching everything with her usual suspicion, but with a looser posture, less out of security and more from disbelief. "You look like you're trying to hug the place."

"I wish I could, but I can't." I turned, arms curling around her. "I'll hug you, instead."

She just stood there, feeling more confused than uncomfortable, as if she still couldn't grasp that someone could truly mean her no harm. That made me hold on tighter, hoping my intentions, my hopes for her to feel better would reach her, like the bone-deep, welcoming warmth of this city had settled within me.

Slowly, she returned the hug. Unlike the last attempts, this wasn't out of fear, or relief, just an awkward attempt at reciprocating affection. "What is this for? Are you upset about your mother?"

"Well, yes. I can't help but be upset about all of this, but that's not why."

She spoke into my hair, voice hesitant. "Then what do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You brought me along for nothing?"

I pulled back to aim a puzzled stare at her. "I brought you along to keep you away from those monsters."

"That's it?"

"What other reason do I need to have?" I searched her face, closed-off, distant all of a sudden. "Sure, it's great to have a friend along with me—not that we ever got the chance to be friends, but now we do! And since neither of us has any intention of going home, and you said you'd help me find Ada, we now have common goals, which is great! We can talk about it, about everything, if you'd like, and we can—"

"Bonnie, you're rambling." Jessamine patted me on the shoulder, alerting me to the fact that Ella had retreated a little, taken aback by my intensity.

I shook my head, regaining a hold of my tongue. "What I mean is, I just want you here."

"To do what?"

"Honestly, I don't have much of an idea of what *I'm* doing, let alone what you'll do," I admitted, embarrassed at my lack of premeditation. Not that I could have planned any of this any better. "But you wanted to take up Leander's offer of attending to his sister, and you wanted to help me find Ada, right?"

"But I don't have to do any of that?" she asked cautiously.

"Well, no, not if you don't want to. But you seemed to want to?"

Frankly, I was a little lost with her sudden mood swing. Was she suspicious of me because I was a fairy now? Or was this because Alan turned out to be my cousin?

Her eyes were going everywhere but in my direct direction, emanating her earlier cornered-animal energy. What should I do? How could I soothe her?

Jessamine seemed to understand what was going on, setting light hands on Ella's shoulders, her wingspan blocking us from view. "You don't owe any of us anything. No one is being nice to you so you can give them something in return."

At that, strangely, Ella made eye contact with her.

Jessamine reached a gentle hand up to cup her face, and Ella didn't flinch away from her touch. "I know this is hard to grasp. Believe me, I know exactly what being taken advantage of is like, and sometimes I'm back to suspecting everyone myself. But Bonnie and her father care about you. If you're worried about being among so many fairies, especially ones so powerful, I doubt they'll let anything happen to you. You can still be cautious, as the Fates know girls like us always have to be. But you don't need to be suspicious of our motives, especially Bonnie's."

Ella nodded, letting out a long, heavy breath. "If you say so." She then faced me, trying to smile, but her face appeared stiffer than Leander's, muscles so unused to such an expression. "But if I get roped into mucking out unicorn stables, I'm blaming you."

The remains of worried tension burst out of me in a bubble of laughter. "If there's mucking to be done, I'll do it myself. I've always wanted to see a unicorn."

Just as I said that, I remembered Leander mentioning that they were actually vicious creatures, citing his sister's unicorn and his less than pleasant experience with her.

As if hearing my thoughts, Leander joined us, stopping so close to me I could feel the heat and tension emanating from him.

Though his face was now more beast than man, he tried to smile at me as he said, "If you return with us to Arbore, after all this is over and done with, I'm sure my sister won't mind you meeting hers." He seemed suddenly embarrassed, dropping my gaze. As if to find a place to aim his eyes, he looked at the largest wicker figure in the center of the pit. "Is that meant to be who I think it is?"

It seemed it did, the giant wicker stag representing the Horned God. It hadn't occurred to me he'd have those who feared and honored him in Faerie.

But though I'd never feared his sculpture outside the Hornswoods, like everyone else in Aubenaire, I now knew I should at least be wary of what it represented. Death.

For death came for us all, after all. And my mother was proof of that.

Alan called loudly as he neared the main manor doors. “Look alive, everyone!”

Mounted torches burst into undulating ruby and ochre flames at his approach, illuminating the burgundy, wooden, double doors that swung open for us.

One hand on the jar in my bag and another gripping Leander’s sleeve, I thought of all I wanted to find on the other side—assistance, answers—and family.

Then, in a solemn line, we entered the heart of Autumn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The doors closed behind us with a sighing whisper, cutting off the chill and the blended scents of the outside.

In their place, contained warmth enveloped us, and a painfully appetizing smell assailed me. My empty stomach knotted in a twist of hunger.

Alan led us along a dimly lit hall ending at an enormous stone fireplace, with rack upon rack bearing patch pickings, with massive, bubbling cauldrons hanging beneath them. The fairies tending to the various foods all had their bright hair done up in braided buns, and wore thin, loose clothes to fend off the heat. I could barely stop myself from running to them, asking to taste the amazing concoctions they were stirring.

As we continued up a spiraling, wooden staircase, my hands eagerly skimmed the vines entwining around its bannister and the hollow, white gourds making its balustrade as my gaze avidly wandered around the floors we passed.

Scented candles sat on stone mounts, polished mahogany doors were fastened by gleaming copper, and carvings of forest animals turned to watch us when we passed them.

But at the top floor, a less comforting display greeted us among cobwebs so thick they seemed to be the one thing holding the walls and ceiling up. A limestone statue of a skeleton stood gazing at us, as if with a knowing, sinister grin, holding a scythe triumphantly. All around it on the walls, hanging in jagged rows, unsettling masks—just like the ones Ada

and I had made the night everything had gone sideways—glared and snarled down at us.

I could only breathe again when we passed this display to reach an open floor with an even higher, steepled ceiling. It was spread with a woolen, crimson carpet that flowed all the way to a set of towering, chiseled doors bearing the design of a leafless tree, and fastened with a golden lock.

Alan stopped before them, addressing my father, “Do you want to do the honors?”

Shaking out his arms and rolling his neck, as if loosening up for a fight, my father readied himself for whatever we’d find on the other side.

I didn’t know how to begin to be ready.

“Here goes nothing,” my father mumbled, then pushed the door open.

Warm light spilled out onto us, so bright after the dimness of the rest of the manor, I teared up.

A yelp was followed by small, clattering feet. My vision returned in time to see a red fox launch itself at my father!

Before I could cry out, I noticed its fat, black-tipped tail wagging madly.

Sure enough, the fox giddily nudged and poked my father with its snout, making him guffaw as he pet it. “Nice to see you too, Todd.”

“SEAMUS!” a man bellowed, rushing towards us from the end of the expansive chamber, his brown slippers shuffling on a carpet identical to the one outside, his patterned, woolen house robe flying behind him.

I gaped at the man who came to a halt before us, my mind spinning in a maelstrom.

He was nothing like I had expected, because this man, with brown hair, chiseled, square face, grey eyes and all, looked identical to my father—if he was twenty years younger!

It was as if he were his nephew instead of Alan. In fact, it didn’t seem possible for him to be Alan’s father.

Stubbled face etched with disbelief, joy disregarding his downturned eyes, my uncle Ossian—if that was truly him—tackled my father, squeezing the fox between them.

“You came back! I can’t believe it—after all this time we’ve been waiting for you to return from …” He pulled back to glare at my father. “*Where have you been*?”

Lips trembling in a smile of emotion and guilt, still holding the squirming-with-excitement fox, hiding half his blushing face behind its head, my father mumbled, “Err … I went back to Hericeurra.”

Hericeurra?

“You *what?*” Ossian’s voice filled the chamber, bounced off every wall, causing doors to crack open along the hallway behind us, allowing peeks for curious inhabitants. “Of all the places to go, you had to go back there? For what? Mum and Dad have long passed on and we don’t have any relatives! I can’t believe you dragged her into this.” He turned to me, fair face bright red. “Belaina, thank you for dragging him back here! I can’t believe—” He froze, face and volume falling with bafflement. “You’re not Belaina.”

“No, she’s not.” Dad put a hand on my shoulder, offering me the fox, which I took gladly. Something to distract me from the storm of clamoring, muddled feelings brewing within me. “She’s our daughter.”

Ossian let out a dry wheeze, making Alan laugh. He swiped at his son’s head. “So, that’s what took you so long! Did you know they were coming?”

Alan ducked, laughing harder. “I swear, it was a happy coincidence that I stumbled upon their little field trip. They wandered into Summer, and were roped into the Games. I kept an eye on them.”

That broke through my muteness, making me grumble, “You did no such thing!”

Alan gave me an infuriating wink. “Oh, but I did. I was going to intervene if any of you got into real trouble.”

My mouth dropped open. “You didn’t consider almost getting killed half a dozen times real trouble?”

He waved dismissively. “Oh, you were doing fine. You all made it out in one piece, didn’t you?”

My hands itched to punch him in his smug mouth. I would have, if I wasn’t still feeling paralyzed. I could only hiss, “No thanks to you!”

My father joined me in glaring at Alan, before turning to his brother. “I suspected who he might be, but couldn’t believe it would be him. Even if he claims he would have intervened, he still let us think we might die.” He gestured at him accusingly. “It didn’t help that he’d claimed his name was Alan! I only knew for sure it was Keenan when I found him sitting on Rowena’s throne.”

Keenan! My grandfather's name!

"Keenan" only waved dismissively at my father's harangue. "Alan is the name I use around humans."

OSSIAN'S ONLY RESPONSE TO LEARNING THAT HIS SON HAD STOOD ASIDE while we'd been tossed into these lethal tests was another smack on the back of his head, before he dismissed the whole thing and faced my father again. "If you're back here, and you had a child who's this big then does that mean…"

I felt my father's arm around my shoulder stiffen as he dropped his gaze with a wince.

"Oh. Oh, no." Ossian's whole face and body sagged with pained defeat. "I knew it'd happen eventually, but not so soon." He turned to me, arms opening and I found myself gladly accepting his hug. "I'm so sorry, my dear."

It was hard not to cry. Not only feeling I was reliving my mother's death, but he was the only family member I knew of, heard so little about from my tight-lipped father, and thought was lost too. Finding him was even more poignant after learning for sure that Adelaide wasn't even a distant relative, making me feel further cut-off.

"How long has it been?" Ossian whispered to my father.

"Going on twelve years now," my father said, voice hoarse.

That made Ossian hug me tighter for a long moment before letting go. He tossed my father another pained and reproachful glance before he visibly shook himself, seemingly deciding not to dwell on the subject for now, and turned to my friends.

"Aren't you an eclectic group! I've never seen a satyr or a harpy this far north from Campania." Before anyone could correct him about their nature, he gave Leander a confused glance, as if he couldn't tell what he was supposed to be, before he dismissed him and turned to Ella, holding out a hand and squinting at her. "And you are…?"

Content with his apparent humanity, Ella set her hand in his. "Ornella Dufreyne."

Ossian's gaze became faraway, contemplative. "Dufreyne—Dufreeeyne. Where have I heard that before?"

"Our local, minor nobility in Aubenaire," I reminded him.

He mouthed Aubenaire with a pinch of confusion, as though the name of our hometown was completely foreign to him. I was about to question him, but my father pushed him. “Will you keep everyone standing like this?”

“Oh, right!” Ossian walked backwards as we started moving, a trait he must have passed down to Alan—to Keenan. “Come in, meet my family—though you already met our rapscallion over there, and my eldest, Sorcha is in Midnight as we speak, staying with the Snow King.”

“Who’s the current King of Winter?” asked my father.

Ossian shuddered. “It’s still Yulian. He’s kind of stuck.”

A haunted look passed over my father’s face. He looked almost guilty. “Does this have anything to do with what happened the last time I was here?”

“We hope to find out soon, once Sorcha reports back.”

“Is she there to be a match?”

“More of an ambassador,” a woman’s lilting voice answered him, coming from the far end of the expansive room. “They need our crops more than ever, now that Winter keeps getting colder and colder.”

Every eye flew to where the lights suddenly intensified, revealing what had been shrouded in shadow till this moment.

In the midst of cushy furnishings, sat a fairy woman on a gilded, claw-footed chair, in jade-colored sleepwear and a velvet robe. Her olive-toned skin surprisingly didn’t clash with her dark-red hair, which was held up in an artfully messy bun.

Despite this place not being a castle, I’d still expected the queen to be an imposing figure on a solid-gold throne encrusted with rubies, dripping in regalia, and draped in fabrics spun by magic and embroidered by a legion of fairies.

Instead, I found what could have amounted to easygoing country nobles in my uncle and his wife, and disappointment evaded me. In fact, I felt comforted, that this place wasn’t as cold and formal as the castle Leander had been confined to, that it was the opposite in every way.

With us in his wake, Ossian flitted to her side, where his own empty armchair had been occupied by a fat, black cat, which blinked at us lazily out of intense emerald eyes.

He stopped beside her and turned to us. “Family and friends, I introduce to you my wife, Queen Rowena of Autumn.”

When Rowena stood, everyone dropped into a deep bow. I followed a moment too late, but just in time to keep Jessamine from tipping backwards, catching her mid-squawk.

“I can’t curtsy with these legs,” she wheezed as she struggled to bend her knees.

I caught her by the arm as I bowed, whispering, “Why not just bow like the others?”

“Before a royal, men bow, and women curtsy.”

“I never saw you do that with Leander.”

“That’s because I told her to cut it out,” Leander whispered to me, head bowed.

“Are royalty supposed to bow to other royals?” I asked.

“Even if I were still a Crown Prince, she’d outrank me, so yes.”

“Please, rise,” Rowena said softly, batting her hand at us. “Let me get a good look at you all.”

As we straightened, Rowena set her book down, approached us, a majestic figure, even in such informal attire and surroundings. She barely spared my father a glance before she peered at me, hurt growing in her dark, round eyes. Framed by thick, long lashes, they were true doe-eyes.

Before I could think of anything to say, she reached out for my hand, gripped my fingers, comfortingly thumbing my knuckles. “I’m so sorry about your mother. She was my dearest friend since girlhood.”

That was yet another shock, and the smile I’d been trying to pin on my face fractured. Overwhelmed tears finally burst through my composure and came rolling down my face.

Sensing my upheaval, the fox nuzzled me with his sharp snout. I placed a kiss on its forehead as I choked, “I hope you can tell me about her.”

Rowena’s eyes softened as she squeezed my hand. “Absolutely. I wish our Sorcha was here. She always wanted cousins her age.”

“Not chronologically,” Ossian clarified. “She’s much older in human timing.”

Before I could ask what that meant exactly, Rowena addressed my friends with raised eyebrows. “And who are you to my relatives?”

Ella and Jessamine only bowed their heads again, the former out of intimidation, and the latter out of subservience.

I slipped my hand from Rowena's so I could stand between the two girls. "These are my friends."

She inclined her head at them in acceptance before her maroon eyes flitted to the others. "And these…men?"

Clancy bowed deeply again. "I am Lord Clarence Gestum, Your Majesty, the Duke of Briarfell."

After she gave him her hand to kiss, she transferred it to Leander. He moved to kiss it but seemed to think better of it, with his longer, sharper teeth in the way, settling for a quick bow.

"I am Leander." When he said nothing more, she raised a prompting eyebrow, and he reluctantly added, "Duke of Rosemead."

"He's the Prince of Arbore," I corrected.

"Arbore!" Ossian clapped, delightedly nudging my father with his elbow. "Our parents were from Arbore!"

His statement hit me like a rock through a window, shattering the remains of my beliefs, scattering their shards to the four winds, before it crashed in the bottom of my mind.

Its impact bolted out my mouth in a flabbergasted bark. "PARENTS?"

Everyone jerked as my father shut his eyes tightly. Ossian's head snapped between us, completely oblivious, before his eyes rounded in disbelief. "Don't tell me you didn't tell her!"

"Yes, Sheen. I was going to tell a little girl who got in trouble for talking too much and always correcting her teachers that, not only did the old continent exist, but that it was where we came from."

"Wait…what…*wait.*…" I babbled, feeling lightheaded. "Are you saying that the reason we had no relatives at all, was because they're all back in Arbore? When did you emigrate from there? Did you even reach Faerie through our woods? Or is that where you and Mum came through and just decided to settle there?"

My father's face remained in a tight cringe.

"What? I swear if you leave anything out again and later tell me that I didn't specifically ask about it—I will scream."

"Please don't, everything echoes here," Ossian begged. "I'll be happy to fill in any gaps he doesn't. We have so many stories I don't get the chance to talk about anymore, because my own children are sick of hearing about them. But I bet you'd love to hear them!"

"Sheen."

“If not, I have written down several of them,” my uncle went on, as if he hadn’t heard my father’s imploring. “And they’ve been in rotation across the realm since Autumn is the biggest producer of paper. I have contributed to a lot of fairy texts over the years. I’ve been thinking of sending some to the mainland. Would you like to see our copies here? You should see the library—”

“Ossian!”

He faced my father with an annoyed frown. “What?”

“Do you even hear yourself when you talk and talk?” my father groaned.

Rowena, who’d walked back to her chair, sat down, picked up her cider, and brought it to her lips to hide her amusement. “As much as a bee hears its own buzz.”

Leander leaned into me, whispering, voice as amused. “So that’s where you get it from.”

For once, his teasing jabs at my personality traits didn’t elicit an eye roll or a retaliation. He was right. This man, this long-lost uncle seemed to be who I took after.

I could have grown up with this man! Having one person who understood me, rather than handling me with mitts of overprotectiveness and bewilderment!

“Har-har, Rowena,” Ossian said, before jabbing an accusing finger at my father. “And don’t you take that tone with me. Really, Shay, I can’t believe you didn’t tell her. By the size of her, she must have been able to keep secrets for a good five years now.”

“I wasn’t always this size,” I grumbled, letting the fox down so he could jump back in his mistress’s lap. “I was a foot shorter until earlier this morning—or however long time has passed since I arrived in this wacky realm.”

Rowena gaped at my father. “You glamoured her entire body? You could have just done her ears!”

“It was Belaina’s idea,” he said defensively. “After—afterwards—I couldn’t lift it even if I wanted to.”

Rowena scoffed. “You could have just had her swim in the nearest sacred spring!”

“I know that *now*.” My father pinched the bridge of his nose, before rubbing his eyes in exhaustion and defeat. “I wasn’t prepared for any of

this. I barely understood half of her decisions, including moving us to Hericeurra—Ericura."

That was the second time he'd called our island by its ancient name. The name I'd seen in the old maps of *The Known World*. The name used by those who believed it to have either sunk into the ocean, or to be completely fictional. Yet that was the term Ossian recognized.

"I need you to explain everything—right now!" I demanded with a stomp of my foot, fury rivaling the flames roaring in their fireplace.

"I second that," said Ossian.

My father looked genuinely stymied. "Where do I even begin?"

"From the very start," I snapped.

His expression tightened in shock at my sharpness, before he finally let out a long, shaky breath.

"Our parents emigrated to Hericeura from the very north of Arbore, with Alberic the Pale, and settled in what became his lair. One day, he went through the woods, never to return, believing he'd find his fairy relatives on the other side. Years later, after months of hard work, helping build half the houses in our town, and working for our father in his smithy, my brother suggested that we take a break and explore the woods, to see if we could find him." He stopped, seeming at a loss, as if he couldn't handle unloading any of his secrets, let alone all of them, after keeping them for so long. And though my head was spinning with these latest revelations, I still managed a prodding gesture. He continued, "We went through Summer the hard way, almost as hard as our journey through it this time. Then the exit opened, and we stowed away on the first ship, and escaped that smoldering region, and found ourselves here."

"And what a relief that was." Ossian patted his wife's hand in a gesture of deep affection. "We came at the worst time, though—or the best, depending on your perspective. To start, we got chased through the most dangerous part of the woods by a headless horseman!"

Clancy did the interrupting for me, intrigued. "Headless? How?"

"As in that horror carried its own severed head by the hair like a lantern!" Ossian laughed as most of us shuddered at the image, as if he was recounting the most amusing anecdote. "It flung it at us at one point, before it flew back into its grip. We thought it must be its way of seeing across longer distances."

“The Veil between the world of the living and the dead passes through our Court,” Rowena mumbled an explanation into her cider. “Hence, the scary masks and the faces on the pumpkins on the night it becomes the thinnest, to warn off anything malicious. The *dullahan* only came after you two because you weren’t wearing masks.”

“Right. Dullahan. Masks.” My father looked as unamused as I felt by this whole topic, facing me, but not making eye contact. “Anyway, getting caught in that terrifying chase was how I met your mother.”

My throat clenched, like it was holding my breath for me with anticipation.

Over the years, I’d come up with various theories to fill the massive gaps in my knowledge, of how they’d met, of what had happened with their families, what had led to her illness. Now this was it. The answer to scatter them all to the wind, the instance that had set my existence into motion.

My heart squeezed so painfully, I almost moaned out loud.

A part of me suddenly didn’t want to know anymore.

My whole life, I’d expected my curiosity to lead to normal revelations, to confirm the scenarios my imagination had cooked up to soothe my need for certainty; at most, to tales of estrangements or family feuds. I had never expected or wished it to reveal any of—*this*.

But it was too late to turn back now.

I’d asked for everything, from the start, and my father was finally obliging.

“Rowena and Belaina were patrolling the woods that night, looking for any children who could have wandered away from the bonfire, when they found us being chased by that headless horseman.” Suddenly, my father’s face filled with such emotion, as if he remembered such scary moments with profound fondness. “Frankly, the masks they wore were scarier than it was in the dimness of the forest. I can still see them clearly now—white, veiny faces with jagged teeth clenched in the most menacing smile, charging at the horseman with silver spears.”

“And you ended up mounting its head on yours.” Ossian winked at Rowena, before wrinkling his nose. “Though I do wish we didn’t have to keep it.”

Rowena shook her head. “You know it works better than a pumpkin outside a window, since even magic flames could be blown out. It stays.”

“Yes, but does it have to stay outside Finnian’s room? Think of the nightmares it’s giving him.”

She flicked her hand, delicately, dismissively. “My parents put far worse outside my window, as you also know. The nightmares these things gave me only made me stronger, and made the monsters that wander my Court seem tame in comparison. Which you should be thankful for, considering how we met. If I hadn’t considered the Headless Horseman nothing to be scared of, none of us would be here having this conversation now.” Rowena waved to my father in a regal gesture. “Continue, Seamus.”

My father shook his head at them fondly, as if he missed their bickering. “Rowena did get the head on her spear, but that was after Belaina pinned its body to a tree with hers. Pulling it back out turned it to ash, but it also damaged the spearhead. When they took us back here with them, I offered to fix it for her, saying that I just needed a fire and a hammer.”

“What did she say?” I asked in a small voice.

“She said that I could repay her later, after we joined in the festivities.” His eyes glazed over, as if he was looking into the past. “I had never met anyone like her, someone so clever, so skilled and brave. But come morning, she was gone—and she’d forgotten her spear.

“It was months later before she returned, saying she came back for her weapon. I’d fixed it, and made her more, hoping she’d return. And once it got out how good we were at working metal, everyone came to us, and we had jobs, held apprenticeships. Ossian’s life took a far more interesting turn when Rowena, who was the heir to the Autumn Court then, chose him as her husband. My life went on like before, with Belaina coming and going. I just remained here, waiting for her, unable to risk crossing the borders in case I couldn’t return.”

He ran his hand over his face, then through his greying hair, gaze unfocused, his distress reflected within me as I held my breath, unable to anticipate what he could possibly say next. “Then one night, after years of random visits, Belaina returned and told me she had to leave Faerie immediately, to avoid the consequences of something she’d done. My one thought was to take her home with me.

“But when I returned, Alberic had been dubbed a saint who’d delivered us from a sun god’s wrath, and the town of Alban’s Lair had become Aubenaire, and my parents were long-dead. I had to pretend to be my own

long-lost relative, there on an inheritance quest and to be the town's new smith. So, to settle the issue, I'm not *old*." He met my eyes with a ragged, melancholy exhalation. "I'm *ancient*."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It seemed that my tolerance for shocking discoveries had run out.

Or I had just been awake for too long. Because my feet vanished from underneath me and I hit the carpet, which provoked a stampede towards me.

Leander reached me first, holding me up against his heaving chest. “Bonnie!”

Feeling boneless, and almost senseless, I mumbled syllables that formed no words, because I had none.

My father knelt by me, cupping my clammy face. “What is it? Is it the transformation?”

“You.” I couldn’t even shake my head. Everything felt too heavy and disconnected. “No more from you…”

He staggered back, having the nerve to look shocked after what he’d just unloaded on me.

My whole life, I had wanted answers, at any cost. Now I wanted to dig down to the underworld like a gopher and stick my head in the River of Forgetfulness, because I couldn’t handle the truth.

The last time this happened to me had been after the people of Rosemead attacked Leander’s castle, and Robin told me that a fairy woman had kidnapped my father.

But I wasn’t going to demand any more answers from him. For now, I —

I didn’t know what to do now.

Leander carefully picked me up, asking me things I couldn't understand. He could have been speaking Cahramani for all I knew.

Jessamine nudged my father, and I passively read the word *sleep* on her lips. Nodding, he stood, giving us a wide berth. We passed Ella, who had her back to yet another wall, as if guarding against phantom attacks from behind. But I couldn't fault her for her wariness. An actual phantom could attack her in this place of knuckelavees, headless horsemen, and horrors to be scared off by detached dullahan heads and demented masks.

Then I heard someone say my name. "Bonnibel."

Over Leander's shoulder, I saw Rowena's face become a startled grimace. "Of all the flowers, why the bonnibel?"

Miss Etheline's dreamy voice swam through my head. *Bonnibel! It's a flower, blue like your eyes.*

"It was Belaina's choice," my father said quietly. "I didn't even know it was a flower. Not until our local innkeeper told me."

Ossian pushed at Leander, waving at all the others. "You must all be so exhausted, awake for so long, not to mention partaking in the Games. You must tell me about that later. Now let me show you to your rooms."

He rushed us out, but Clancy stayed behind. Leander regarded him questioningly, only to be waved off. "There's something I need to ask Her Majesty about the celebrations."

I could hear the frown in Leander's voice. "Now?"

Clancy nodded. "Yes, now. I like to be prepared. Old habits and all, especially since it's been a good while since I've attended any event."

Leander didn't seem to believe him, but he let it go. "See you in the morning, then."

As the doors shut behind us, I saw Clancy approaching Rowena. But at that point, I was more interested in whatever demon-guarded room I was to be put in, than whatever new secrets were brewing before my eyes.

Leander readjusted his hold on me, raising me so my head lolled on his shoulder, and I couldn't help the sigh of contentment.

I could barely recognize my own body or the man who had raised me. My father had become more of a stranger with each word out his tight-lipped mouth. While Leander's hold, his closeness was more familiar to me than anything else in the world.

As we waded down a dim hall, opposing doors creaked open, and nearly identical heads poked out. Two children, a girl and a boy, with

Rowena’s brown eyes and Ossian’s chestnut-brown hair, watched us pass. The girl gave me a small wave, her smile made more endearing by the number of missing teeth.

I tried reciprocating, but my face felt too stiff. I could only muster a greeting wag of my fingers, an underwhelming introduction to yet more unknown relatives.

“Finnian! Fiona! Back to bed!” Ossian shooed them, and they shut their doors, leaving their giggles echoing in the hall.

So Ossian had claimed my grandmother’s name for one of his daughters, as he’d claimed my grandfather’s name for Keenan, with no changeling business involved in my own name. And the fact that he’d had twins suggested that he and my father were as well.

A notion spiked in my hazy, bitter mind. That I could one day have twins too, and name them Basil and Lily, to continue the nature-name tradition of Arbore.

The painful thought of a chatty, rowdy princess with my eyes and hair, and a reserved, bookish prince with Leander’s solemn eyes and expressions, reminded me that I had never given much thought to my future. Adventures and answers had been all I’d wanted. Now that I’d gotten them, what was I to do with myself?

Jessamine caught up with us, her concerned face making her look even more owlish. I felt bad for making her worry, when she had her own humanity and possibly lifespan to be upset over. What I had promised to fix.

Ossian indicated a few doors, signaling which was meant for whom. The last one he opened, and had the whole group squeeze inside.

It was a cozy, squared space, with mahogany furniture, all facing a blazing brick-and-mortar fireplace that had Ella scurrying back out. That made Keenan, who insisted on calling her Cinders, laugh, earning him a punch in the arm from Jessamine.

He rubbed his arm with a wide grin. “You’re one cranky bird.”

“Yes, I am,” she snapped at him. “And if you bother her again, I will pick you up and drop you on one of those bare trees like a shrike.”

Keenan either didn’t buy the threat or just couldn’t help being obnoxious as he wiggled his eyebrows. “You can’t talk to me like that, I’m a prince. I can have you roasted like a turkey.”

“You’re the son of a smith.” Ossian caught his son by the ear and dragged him out, ignoring Keenan’s complaints about “Being too old for this!” Or his protests that “It was a joke!”

Once their footsteps and bickering faded, Leander finally spoke, “So, it’s not just my family that’s this messy.”

Any other time, I would have laughed.

Not waiting for a response, he set me down on the bed and I sank into the giant pillows, limbs melting onto the ruby-red duvet.

Three faces now peered down at me, making me want to disappear into the bed. I didn’t deserve that concern, especially when they didn’t show it towards their own genuine troubles.

“I’m fine,” I croaked, cringing as my own voice belied my words.

“And I’m a sylph.” Ella sat at my feet. Feet that were now one stretch away from pressing against the footboard.

“You could be,” I said, attempting lightheartedness. “Anything seems possible now.”

Leander set his hand over mine. “It was a lot to take in, I’m sure. You’ll no doubt feel better in the morning.”

Jessamine readily agreed. “You need to sleep on it. I’ll see where the nightwear is!”

Ella joined her before I could protest. We hadn’t dragged them all the way here just so they could continue serving others. Coming here was meant to set us all free.

They converged on a polished armoire, trading whispers as they browsed it, lingering until I felt it was an excuse for Ella to stay as far away as possible from the fire.

Revisiting the moments when we’d burst into the Dufreyne mansion, roused me from my stupor. I might be upset with my father for keeping such monumental truths on a shelf I couldn’t reach, but no matter how different he’d turned out to be from the person I’d thought him to be, he was still a good man. He’d believed he was doing the right thing, the safe thing, for me.

That being said, I wasn’t going to go back to Ericura with him when this was over, and pretend that the last month hadn’t happened.

Month.

I sat up so fast Leander jerked in alarm. But when I took off my bag to frantically dig inside for the rose, he snatched it from me. “I think you’ve

had enough stress today."

"I want to see how much time we've wasted, if we've been here a thousand years as well!"

"If we were, I'd probably be a rug in the queen's quarters right now." He took a good look around the room, along with a deep whiff of the soothing mix of wood, warm brick, and incense. The candle on my nightstand had lit itself at some point, a murky green cylinder that smelled of pine trees. "Now that I mention it, I'm surprised by the lack of animal decor."

"Would you rather it looked like the Woodbine lodge?"

He shuddered, eyelashes fluttering with revulsion. "If this is all resolved, my first action as Crown Prince will be to abolish hunts. Wolves, foxes—" His gaze slid to Jessamine's back. "Vultures. They're to be left alone."

I turned my hand up under his, content that it was still comparatively smaller. "It will get resolved."

"Let's not talk about that now," he said quietly, facing the fire.

The girls returned, and Jessamine hustled him out so I could change.

Soon I had my ringing head stuck in a neckline, and leaden arms shoved into tangling sleeves as the two girls fussed over me. I had gone from being child-sized to being dressed like one, by the ones I wanted to coddle.

"You don't have to do this," I wheezed. "I can dress myself."

Ella forced the gown past my ears, the cloth briefly snagging over my new, pointed tips. "You can barely stand."

I groaned, feeling immensely pathetic. "Why am I so lousy? You weren't that fazed by finding out your stepfamily weren't human, and Jessie, you're just—you have—you're—" My tongue flopped like a dead fish, too fat and heavy in my mouth.

Jessamine sighed. "*You're* being too hard on yourself. You didn't see me when I first started to change. I was much worse than you. We all were. The only difference is we all reached our breaking points a long time ago, you just never had the chance to hit yours till now."

"Not that that's something to aspire to," Ella added, pulling my right arm through a velvet, yellow robe. "Also, I always knew they were monsters, human or not. And it's not like I felt betrayed by them turning

out to be evil fairy creatures, because apparently there are now good fairies and bad fairies."

Jessamine brushed my hair back, feeling my head for bumps as she went. "And whatever your cousin Keenan is, you don't think I'll get in trouble with him, do you? I've never talked to an employer like that, let alone a prince. It's just that we've had a long, harrowing day and I was sick and tired of fairy antics."

"I doubt it." I fell forward, wrapping an arm around her and the other around Ella, pulling them into a clumsy hug. "That was the least he deserved for what he let us go through, especially knowing full well who Dad and I were."

"Think we can convince your uncle to punish him?" Jessamine suggested eagerly. "He seemed keen on disciplining him."

"Any ideas on how?"

"Make him scrub the floors till his hands bleed."

Jessamine and I froze up at Ella's gruff rumble.

Pulling apart, we found her staring at the fireplace, hands clenched, mouth twitching. Whatever moment she was revisiting, it had sparked a rage to rival those flames.

I stepped away, barely catching myself when my knees buckled. "Time to get you both ready for bed too. You get the gowns, and I'll get the scissors to modify them for your wings."

Jessamine's wing blocked my path, herding me back on the bed. "No need to ruin any of our hosts' garments! I'll just find something big enough to pull over my head, considering my wings aren't that separate from my arms anymore."

That fact, which she made sound convenient, was anything but comforting.

Barely suppressing a shudder at its implications, I tapped Ella, pulling her from her trance. "What about you? I can…braid your hair for you?"

Schooling her face, she quirked a curious brow. "You know how to braid?"

"I'm not *that* useless."

She let out a genuine yet tired huff. "That's not what I meant. It's just Ada had short hair, so who did you practice braiding on?"

"Myself? I had a lot of free time, so I learned tips from diagrams in a book on court fashion."

Jessamine dropped on the bed, giving me her back. “What would we do if someone hadn’t thought to draw out steps in a book, right?”

Pouncing on the chance to return the favor, I combed her loose waves with my fingers and started braiding.

Ella leaned against the wall, watching us with crossed arms, sneaking glances at the fire. “I haven’t read much, not in years. They always kept me mired in chores.”

“Ada told me your library was a ‘mausoleum,’ so I doubt your stepsisters read either.”

At that, I had her rapt attention. “When did she see our library?”

“So, Dolora knocked me into a puddle one day, ruined my dress, and the book I had—it was about medicinal brews—but Ada was livid, and she wanted to get back at her so she…”

I stopped my rambling with a grimace. Ada wouldn’t appreciate me telling that story.

But then I doubted it mattered anymore, to any of us, with us scattered across the Folkshore and Faerie.

I sighed as I went on. “She, well—she kind of robbed your family. Gave me two books from your library, among other compensations. One of them showed me that the Folkshore existed, and I got a little obsessed. Sorry.”

Whatever expectation of hurt or outrage I expected from Ella splintered at her bursting into raspy, worn-out laughter, a hand on her heart. “I knew she was lying about being there for me—but that’s just hilarious.”

I couldn’t help grinning at the first display of delight I’d seen from her. But I still had to correct her. “For what it’s worth, she really *did* want to invite you over. So did I. If things hadn’t gone the way they did, we could have gotten you out of your situation sooner. The gods know she wanted to fight your stepmother and save you from her.” I finished Jessamine’s braid, watching her magnificent crimson feathers gleam in the light of the dancing flames. “We could have been like this, in my room, talking and braiding each other’s hair.”

“Instead, you and your father fought my stepmother, got me out of my situation, and to a place beyond my wildest dreams—and here we are, three girls in a room, braiding hair,” she summed up, checking her palms. They were calloused. “Not a bad turnout.”

“You met your goal, time and place notwithstanding,” Jessamine yawned, stretching as she stood up, curling her taloned toes. “But the time is late and the place I’d like to be is in a bed.”

I rose to give Jessamine a goodnight hug, arms wrapping lower than they had just days ago, when her wings were smaller and attached to a shorter span of her back.

When she got to the door, she stuck her head out, ear aimed at Rowena’s…sitting room? Modest throne room? Waiting for Clancy to emerge, no doubt.

“What do you think he’s talking to her about?” I asked her.

Leander appeared in the doorway, scaring a small shriek out of Jessamine. I’d thought he’d gone to his room, but he must have been waiting outside all this time.

“Probably asking for a guard,” he said. “Or for a notice informing all the attendants that he’s a harmless satyr, so no one spears him.”

Judging by how much bigger his ears had gotten, and his inhumanly sharp hearing, he had heard exactly what Clancy’s business with Rowena was. I could tell he wasn’t telling the truth.

Great. More lies.

Seemingly satisfied with his answer, Jessamine bowed her head to him and bid us all goodnight, before she shut her door across from mine.

Ella remained behind me, but I could feel the wariness radiating from her.

Taking the hint, Leander stepped away from the doorway, no doubt still within earshot but out of sight. I felt her relax.

I reached out my hands to her. “Your turn for a braid?”

She pulled her hair out of its sagging bun, and it barely brushed her shoulders. “Not much there for a braid.”

“Do you prefer it that way?”

She rolled her shoulders in a shrug. “I didn’t have time to care for longer hair, that, and they didn’t like it when it got longer.”

Irritation flared like a rash within me. I wished my father had hit them harder with that iron poker. “You sure there’s nothing I can do for you?”

“Is this about me helping dress you for bed?”

It was, partially, but not the way she made it sound. “Just being fair, is all.”

“Is that how things were with you and Ada? Tit-for-tat?”

“No! I just didn’t want you to think that you had to wait on me or something, same goes for Jessie—” I toed at the carpet, searching for a more graceful way out of this. “I told you that I brought you here to be free, not to do for me what you did for your stepsisters.”

“I know, and I believed you.” She reached out uncertain hands then dropped them on my shoulders, her eyes reluctant to meet mine until she made a determined face and came closer, as if to show me she trusted me. She got so close I saw her eyes blending into one.

“Are you seeing one eye, too?” I asked dazedly.

Giggling tiredly, she pulled back a little. “My mum said that in the South they had stories of one-eyed giants called cyclopes. They probably got that from the same culture that shared their tales of half-gods and flying horses.”

“Campania or Oresteia or both,” I said.

Nodding, she gave me a weary half-smile. “Bonnie, I know that you don’t feel entitled to my services, and I am grateful for that. So, from now on, consider anything I do paying you back, for everything.”

“You don’t need to pay me back!”

“Consider it a favor, then.”

“Deal.” I huddled closer, giving her a parting squeeze. “See you in the morning?”

She nodded as she retreated to the open door, eyes slanting to where Leander no doubt still stood. “If the weird creatures in the woods don’t get us first.”

When I heard her door shut, Leander emerged and I ushered him in, relieved that he wasn’t avoiding me anymore.

He shook his head, hand deep in his pocket. “I just wanted to make sure you’re all right. You need to sleep.”

“But I want to talk.”

“Tomorrow.”

I was too exhausted to overthink his refusal to talk, so I let it—along with everything else for now—go.

“Tomorrow then.” I ran my cold hands over my warm face, pushing my hair back. I couldn’t help stopping to feel my ears again, longer, pointy, a little like his. They felt so sensitive to the touch, as well as my hearing itself. In fact, everything since the waters had felt too loud.

He wiggled his own ears, they now stood straighter than when we had first met. “It’s your hearing, isn’t it?”

I approached him slowly as he stood filling the doorway, heart doing a strange little flutter. “It is. I don’t understand if it’s fairy senses, or if I’m just very sensitive now.”

“I think it’s also the shape. Slight differences seem to make a world of difference when it comes to our bodies.” He pulled a disgusted face, the skin of his nose bridge wrinkling, an endearing expression in the midst of his harsh features. “For me it’s my nose more than anything, there are some scents I can’t ignore, and no amount of spices or perfume can block them out.”

“What do I smell like?”

The patches of visible skin beneath his thickening hair colored furiously in the light pouring out of the room. “A little different than you did before. But thinking back, I should have suspected you weren’t entirely human.”

In that instant, I wanted nothing more than to become a turtle and disappear into my own shell. “Does it bother you?”

He leaned towards me, turquoise eyes solemn. “It did at first, but now —I know better.”

My heart kicked my ribs at his tone. “But you’re not completely fine with it?”

“I think you don’t want me to lie to you.”

No, I didn’t. I wanted everything to be out in the open. But I also wanted some issues to be neither covered up nor revealed. I wanted to pretend they didn’t exist.

“I’ll just need some time.” He took his hand out of his coat pocket, holding his silver mirror. Mine was still in the bag along with the rose. I didn’t know where the girls had put it. “Just like you did at the start.”

“It’s only fair, I suppose.”

He stroked his chin, claws scraping against his beard as his lips twitched. “If we’re being fair then I should find some enchanted apple tree here to disturb, maybe escape into the night for a romp with homicidal dryads.”

That joke soothed some of my worries, making me roll my eyes at him. “That was only because you scared me!”

His lips spread over his fangs, an expression I'd once found terrifying, but now delighted in seeing. "You got a bit scary in that meeting with the queen, something I'd have never expected of you."

"Thank you," I said, genuinely pleased. "Maybe I can use that on the Spring Queen when we finally catch her—oh! The mirrors!" I reached for his, fired up. "They can show us where she is."

But the glass was already occupied, showing his sister sitting in a dim room by high windows set in a marble wall, staring ahead blankly, while two petite girls fussed over here. She looked defeated, like nothing was worth moving or even breathing for anymore.

Before I ran to look for my mirror, Leander's head shake stopped me. "I don't want to think about that woman now. We'll find her in her Court." He returned the mirror to his pocket. "But I just can't help wondering."

"About?"

His exhalation was heavyhearted. "If breaking my curse will also break my sister's."

I hadn't considered that option. Fairuza's fate was left up to the prince she went to marry, but if the competition was over, and she had lost, then what did she have left?

My shoulders sagged further. "I don't know. We'll have to ask the queen when she lifts yours."

"And that's enough thinking for today," he said, in a forced, lighter tone.

I tried to truly lighten the mood. "Can't we at least wonder where we'll have breakfast?"

"Your uncle said we'll break our fast with them, but you can have things brought to your rooms. Speaking of which…" He pulled something that had been just outside the door. A tea trolley with painted, baked-clay mugs and a copper teapot, with a small plate of brown sugar cubes. "Keenan passed these around, said they're meant to help us sleep after the day we've had."

"What is it?"

"I haven't tried mine yet, but he said it's some water-lily tea."

I pulled the trolley in. "Sounds interesting. Bring your cup, we can debate who has more sensitive taste buds as we try it."

He only retreated further back into the hall. "If we do that, it defeats the purpose of the tea. We'll just keep talking for hours."

I stopped abruptly, and the wheels rolled onto my toes. My yelp of pain and groan of disappointment merged. “Is that so bad?”

“It is when we all need our rest. Tomorrow is another day.”

“If we can call the timing here days!”

That had gone unanswered as he shut the door behind him.

It didn’t matter that I knew he could hear me, he was done talking for tonight. And maybe he didn’t want to be around me anymore right now.

Shaking the pain off my toes, and rubbing at the stitch in my heart, I poured myself a cup of cloudy, dark-blue tea. It was bitter, yet strangely pleasant and soothing. I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the fireplace as I sipped.

Time was what we all needed. To process. To accept. To travel and to fix our problems. And in my case, to understand my own feelings towards my father, my mother, myself, and Leander.

But we didn’t have much time.

And then there was the uncertainty about Adelaide. Fairuza had clearly escaped the predicament we’d seen them in. Had Adelaide?

I found my bag by the bed, got out the mirror and asked to see her.

It showed me a messy hovel, and in its midst stood a white statue draped in tattered laundry, of a man sculpted mid-attack, gripping a dagger high overhead.

As the image became clearer, I gaped at the statue. Apart from its total paleness and the rage contorting its features, it looked like the male version of Adelaide!

Next second she burst into the scene, looking gaunt, exhausted and disheveled. I cried out, as if hoping she’d hear me. But before I could see any more details, the images faded away, becoming replaced by my still unfamiliar reflection.

My heart thundered with renewed anxiety. But at least I now knew she’d escaped too, and she looked uninjured. I had no option but to be thankful for that now.

Exhaling raggedly, I upturned the mug, swallowing the rest of the warm tea in a big gulp.

Soon, the corners of my sight grew hazy as sleep finally spread out to claim me.

I fell onto the bed, gratefully sinking into its oblivion.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Deep as my slumber was, it was not dreamless.

But considering the slew of strange events my worn-out mind conjured up, I wished it had been.

I dreamt of a ghost in a castle covered in giant briars and an ice sculpture set before a mirror that whispered unnerving promises. The dream became of a girl with long, pale hair sinking into murky depths, while the world above glowed a sickening green. What rose back up in her dress, was a green-haired frog. What followed it out of the water was a red-haired mermaid carrying the body of man with bull horns and red wine spilling from his mouth.

The dream shifted to a very tall girl with wavy, golden hair, walking over a land that cracked beneath her feet, vines twisting up and out to rope her ankles and drag her into the earth.

Then the Horned God with his stag skull and purple cloak turned to me, and in his bone-white hands was the body of the golden-haired girl, her face blank but her eyes glowing a menacing green. Her empty, sunken chest cavity was filled with dirt and miniature crop fields, and trees grew out from where her heart and lungs should be.

The sight struck me with such fear, I awoke with a strangled scream.

Kicking against the heavy duvet, I fell out of bed and into a patch of sunlight spilling from a mounted eyebrow window. Outside, I could hear children laughing and people shouting orders.

Groggy, but intrigued, I hobbled over to the light and pressed my face to the cool glass to watch as a group of men pulling ropes from different

directions lifted a massive, carved log upright, with others running around making arrangements for the bonfire.

That reminded me where I was, that what had happened since we'd gone to Nexia had not been a long-winded dream.

I was really in Faerie, and I was the spawn of a thousand-year-old smith, who'd lived when legends were being made, and a shifty fairy courtier, whose dangerous secrets had them fleeing back to the end of the human world—and had likely gotten her killed.

Recoiling from that thought, as if I had burned my hand on a hot stove, I tried to think of less disturbing things. But each consecutive thought that leapt up to take its place was more unbearable, making me want to avoid checking the silver mirror again for another glimpse at the current condition of my best friend, or the rose for the remaining time of my new friends.

But whether I liked it or not, I had to know.

A knock came at the door, stopping me before I could check either.

Ella poked her head in, eyes half-shut against the light, looking as bone tired as I felt.

She yawned wide and loud. "That was the longest sleep I've ever had. I'm used to being up at the crack of dawn and getting smacked around if I didn't have breakfast in their rooms by now."

"If we ever have the misfortune of coming across those people again, promise me you'll break those glass shoes over their heads."

"About those shoes, did you know there's a ball tonight?"

The better dreams of my former life came waltzing back in on perfumed clouds, piling pages of my favorite books up behind my eyes. "A ball? That's what the harvest bonfire is?"

"They said it's the ball in the evening, then for the rest of the night, up until dawn, the bonfire." She checked behind her as someone left their room. Jessamine's head squeezed in next to Ella's, chin on her shoulder, looking like a ruffled owl. "Can we discuss stuff at breakfast? Because whatever they're preparing smells really good."

Ella sniffed the air. "I think I smell roasting seeds. Is that for you?"

"Pretty sure I'm the type of bird that eats ducks, not seeds," Jessamine deadpanned, hustling in. "Let's get you both dressed. The sooner you're presentable, the sooner we eat."

Any protests fell on deaf ears as she picked out clothes for us both.

“You’re not a lady’s maid anymore, Jessie,” I insisted.

“Just because we left the castle doesn’t mean I’m something else now,” she said, shaking a pine-green dress at me. “Besides, I’m keeping myself busy so I don’t accost Clancy.”

“Nice that he’s Clancy now and not Lord Gestum, huh?” I teased, sticking my feet into rolled up socks.

Jessamine spluttered some flustered noises, making Ella cover her mouth, eyes crinkling with mirth. “If you had to pick a goat, then I commend you for picking that one.”

“He’s a satyr, not a goat,” Jessamine snapped, the feathers along her back ruffling. “Not yet, at least, and not ever, hopefully.”

“Honestly, he seems too harmless to be a satyr, more of a faun.” Ella abandoned her unfortunate attempt at joking as she thumbed the bumpy pattern of her own cream dress.

I managed to pull my own over my head with no help this time, but forgot my ears yet again. “Isn’t faun another word for satyr?”

“Fauns are a nicer, less aggressive sort, more pastoral than wild, I suppose,” Ella said. “Though, considering the similar stories under different names, they could be the same thing.”

“People could have called the ones they had bad experiences with satyrs, and the ones that were friendlier, fauns,” I suggested. “I wonder if good fairies and bad fairies have different names too.”

Jessamine found me a pair of brown boots, sturdier than any I’d ever worn. “I think the Master once called them Seelies and Unseelies?”

Ella glowered at the fireplace. “Seelies being good and Unseelies being bad?”

Somewhere, in the recesses of my memory, I had heard him call the Spring Queen a Seelie. “I don’t think it has anything to do with whether they’re nice to us or not. It might just be those who look human and, well, the grotesqueries like redcaps and knuckelavees.”

“Taking Keenan into account, ‘Seelie’ just sounds like a very Northern way of saying ‘silly,’” Ella grumbled.

“Could be.” Jessamine dusted her palms together, declaring her job done. “Now, to go see what those heavenly scents are and what Clancy did with my tiara.”

Ella followed me out, and we walked in a line down the hall. “Maybe he ate it?”

“Why would he eat metal?” Jessamine hissed.

Ella shrugged. “He said he ate forks. And he’s currently a goat. They eat anything.”

Jessamine scowled at her. “Would you quit with the animal jokes?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just so fascinated by all this, by you all,” Ella said in a rush. And though she was far more lacking in social graces than even me, she sounded apologetic enough. “As a group, now including Bonnie’s growth spurt and ears, you are out of a common person’s nightmares. One would think you’d be worse than the Unseelies I endured, but you’re all so…”

“Nice?” I offered, taking in the Autumn Court’s royal manor in the morning light as we approached the queen’s living room. The sounds of chatter and cutlery upon plates came from behind the doors, and the blend of aromas emanating from inside made my mouth water.

“I was going to say non-threatening, but yes. Even the biggest and scariest of you is harmless. Which makes me want to know more than ever—why?”

I pressed my ear to the door first, trying to hear anything my family were saying in my absence. “Why we’re not threatening?”

“After those tests they put us through, I assure you we all can be,” said Jessamine proudly. “I must say, if we do break this curse, I’m going to miss having talons and wings. They’ve given me protection my own father and brothers never thought to offer me.”

“I meant why my stepfamily chose to be horrible to me?” Ella said, voice trembling with remembered dread and rising fury. “If they could take on the forms of people, like Bonnie and her mother could, why not act like us? Why be so cruel to me for no reason?”

Jessamine sighed. “Because they could. But then again, being monstrous has nothing with being a monster. I knew that long before I became one, from serving people who didn’t consider me a person, then from being attacked by those who didn’t care if I used to be one.”

My interest in whatever the men were discussing with the queen vanished. The girls’ discussion was all I had ears for.

Jessamine had told me what her life had been like before she’d sought work in the castle as an escape. That even after being transformed, she would have chosen such a state over her former life. But while Jessamine got to keep some of the money she’d made for enduring her previous

employers, Ella just had these things show up one day in her house and take advantage of her, while squandering the wealth that was meant for her.

It was nice that they could relate to one another and find solace in their common experiences. But it reminded me just how far removed from common life I was. I'd been untested by any struggle until this adventure I'd been flung into, and I still couldn't begin to relate to them. Adelaide would have had no trouble joining their conversation, with horror stories about customers and employers and scary nights alone and on the run, and the many risks she'd taken to survive.

But just because I couldn't empathize, didn't mean I couldn't sympathize with them, and do my part to deliver them to better places in life.

An idea streaked across my mind, linking to Leander's offer to make arrangements for Ella and to abolish game hunting. Had it been possible for me to become his princess, I would have taken up causes close to my heart, made laws and sent out labor inspections to make sure that no working girl had to endure what my three friends had.

But as much as I loved riveting tales of love conquering all, our lives were nothing like those of *Amadeus & Gratia*. Our ordeals wouldn't end in a happily ever after.

Shaking myself from my impossible reverie, and bracing for seeing my father and newfound family again, I knocked and we entered.

Deeper into the chamber than we'd gotten last night to the left, roots sprouted up from the floor intertwining up into legs to support an irregular, oval top. At the head of this unusual table, Rowena sat with Ossian to her right and my father to her left. Down from Ossian were Keenan and the twins, Finnian and Fiona. Across from them sat Clancy and Leander, heads together, deep in discussion.

Whatever they were talking about seemed to have my family pleased as could be.

Family. It was almost the most inconceivable of everything that had happened so far.

I had a whole family now.

Everyone but Rowena stood to greet us, making me feel like I had back in Rosemead Castle during my initial meals with Leander. My throat tightened as I wondered how the staff we had left behind were faring

without us, their protection in the hands of Jessamine's brothers and Robin, who had a broken arm now and couldn't use his bow.

That was, if they hadn't been called back to the front lines for Arbore's war with one of the Northland Kingdoms. A war that had King Florent leading his armies, leaving his corrupt brother Prince Jon in charge, when it should have been Leander.

Searching the faces of those at the table, my heart ached for Leander and his family, who were all the victims of hardships and curses, and whom he hadn't seen in three years.

"Good morning." I made sure to curtsy to the queen this time, before bowing my head to both sides of the table.

Clancy nodded his approval as he vacated his seat, holding it out for me, seating me by Leander while he sat by Jessamine, leaving Ella at the end, away from everyone's attention as she seemed to prefer.

Across from us was one empty seat, for the eldest daughter, who was representing her family in Winter, as Keenan had in Summer. The twins, who watched me with big, curious eyes, would grow up to take similar positions.

Fiona reached across the table, offering me a muffin. "I'm Fiona, nice to meet you."

"I'm Bonnie, and the pleasure is all mine." I accepted her offering with a watery smile, unable to help being moved. This little princess was the cousin I had always wanted, who bore our grandmother's name, an Arborean woman neither of us had ever met. And here we were, breaking fast in a cozy, fairy manor.

Finnian seemed less interested in me, and more fascinated by Jessamine. Keenan reached over and shoved his shoulder. "Greet our cousin, Finny. She came all the way from the boring end of the world to see us."

Flushing with embarrassment, Finnian extended a hand with a smile that was missing its two front teeth. I shook his sticky fingers then took the butter knife he offered me, point forwards.

"It's better with salt," he whispered. "Mummy says too much salt is not good, but the butter and bread have no taste otherwise."

Leander leaned in, pretending to be secretive as he mock-whispered, "She probably didn't mean you should swear off additives, just don't dump the whole shaker into your porridge. I once put too much paprika in

mine so I wouldn’t feel it slithering down my throat, and got smacked upside the head.”

The twins burst out into delighted giggles, making my chest fill with warmth.

Keenan beat me to asking, “What’s paprika?”

“It’s this spicy powder, a mix of different red peppers. They use it liberally in the cuisine of the Jowaher states.”

“Jowaher?” I asked, seeking out his eyes, the curiosity I’d thought forever doused igniting again.

“It’s what they call the lands that used to be part of the Avestan Empire. When it fell, every land, from the northernmost Almaskham, to Zargoun at the end of the continent, took on the names of jewels—hence the term *jowaher*. My mother’s kingdom is one of them,” he explained, gaining the rapt attention everyone, including Ella, and the surprising silence of Keenan. “Though calling Cahraman a ‘jewel’ is debatable.”

“What does it mean?”

“Amber.”

“Ambers are the gem of the woods,” Rowena said to him. “They come in many shades and colors, no different to diamonds from the mountains and pearls from the sea, not as far as we’re concerned.”

“I think that’s why that name was chosen.” He nodded, sounding pleased. “Because after the empire fell and its constituents drew borders for new lands, the population maintained a variety in appearance. From those who are fair-haired and pale like my great-grandfather, to those who are black-haired and swarthy like my mother.”

It was strange, hearing him talk freely of his family. Seeing Fairuza in the mirror yesterday must have aroused his nostalgia about them all, no matter the role any of them had played in his curse.

Our uncertain relationship notwithstanding, I had to find a way to reunite him with his family, like he had helped unite me with my own. I wanted to even find a way for him to finally meet the ones in his mother’s homeland.

“There is blue amber here,” Ossian said excitedly. “You can find it in the trees nearby.”

“Blue is such a rare color in nature, but it seems to thrive in Faerie!” Clancy said.

“Not too rare on your side, either. Most of you have blue eyes,” Keenan pointed out, drenching his pancakes with syrup.

“He meant *nature*,” Leander rumbled, clearly still bristling at everything Keenan said or did. “As in leaves and grass. Ours are strictly green.”

As the two men bickered, my gaze wandered around, still unable to believe I was really here, among a big family.

But apart from myself and Ella, I couldn’t agree with Keenan. Blue wasn’t really the prevalent color among my group. My father had grey eyes, Leander’s were an amazing turquoise, and Clancy’s were now yellowing—but maybe he still considered all those distinct shades blue.

It was then that I realized I’d never asked Jessamine what her eyes looked like, before they’d become that bright, predator-yellow. I leaned over to meet her gaze, and as if the question was evident on my face, she simply mouthed, “Hazel.”

Clancy was asking my uncle, “Can we see these trees?”

Ossian began to stand at once, clearly eager to show us around, but Rowena tugged him back down, making their children snicker. He sighed. “A tour after breakfast, then. You have to get to know the place before the ball tonight.”

Miffed and disheartened that Leander hadn’t spoken to me yet, I focused on the baskets and plates of food before me. The mounds of bakeries, butter, and jams reminded me of my breakfasts with Leander and Clancy in Rosemead Castle, bringing a surprising wave of yearning buffeting me.

Who would have thought I’d long for those days? When I’d thought I was a hostage, then a reluctant guest forced to remain, separated from my father and unable to look for Adelaide? But at least then, Leander hadn’t avoided me…

Before I tossed a bunch of muffins at his hairy head in frustration, I followed Finnian’s advice, salted my buttered roll, and stuffed it in my mouth, whole.

Ossian gave us an enthusiastic summary of tonight’s events as we ate, gesturing so much, a piece of syrupy hotcake flew off his fork at one point—not that he noticed.

“To sum up, after we greet our guests inside, we’ll dine and dance to the rise of the harvest moon. Once it’s at its peak, we’ll head outside, light

the wicker figures and celebrate around the bonfire. There will be a few priests and priestesses there, to serve the fertility gods and whoever else is attending."

"How would they serve us?" Jessamine asked nervously. "They'll be more likely to shoo me with a broom."

"As long as you resist any harpy urge to snatch their food, you should be fine," Rowena said, a serene presence radiating power, the total opposite of her hyperactive husband. "They'll mostly be there to make sure no one falls into the fire, to offer blessings, and officiate marriages."

At that, I caught Leander and Clancy exchange a look over my head.

"Don't people typically marry in spring—oh, right—you're in perpetual autumn." Ella stabbed the last piece of sausage on her plate awkwardly. "How do you plant, if you have no seasons?"

Keenan leaned on his elbows, chin on his folded hands to observe her with what seemed like great interest. "We do, they're just less extreme than yours are on the other side of the ocean. Our courts are named for the most constant weather and geography. Even Winter has warmer months and blossoming seasons."

Rowena gazed into her mug, sloshing liquid around. "Not at the rate Yulian has been deteriorating, they won't."

My father choked, launching into throat-tearing coughs. I jumped to my feet, but Leander beat me to pounding him on the back.

He waved us off with watering eyes, dry coughs interrupting his speech. "Just a cranberry raisin I didn't chew properly—nothing serious."

From the way Rowena was eyeing him over the rim of her mug, that wasn't the case. I was tired of my presence being weighed down by the unsaid. But if Ossian hadn't blurted out the real reason already, I decided it wasn't important right now.

Keenan stood with an attention-gripping clap. "So, what is everyone wearing tonight? Cinders, have you tried on those crystal shoes?"

Glowering at him, what seemed to be her default expression, especially at him, Ella still said, "I did. They're surprisingly comfortable."

"For you they are, but I bet if anyone else puts them on they'll make their feet bleed." He almost skipped to the doors. "On that note, if anyone wants to see the blue amber come straight from the trees, or find what they'll wear tonight, you better start moving."

Finding that prospect more exciting that staying around my secretive companions, I followed him, catching Jessamine and Ella's wrists as I went. I didn't bother inviting Leander, Clancy, or my father. They followed us nonetheless, yet none of them attempted to make conversation with us, unnerving me further.

But I wasn't going to let any of these shifty men ruin tonight. The only times I'd been at anything approaching a social event, it had been going with my father to the market or the bonfire. Now I was finally going to be at a real one—a royal ball of all things.

It was a dream I'd never dared have coming true. And it would be our last reprieve before we had to resume our fateful mission.

So they could keep their secrets, and Leander could keep his distance. Tonight, I would interact and take in all I could of the culture of my uncle's Court.

Tonight I would dance, laugh, and live.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

For some reason I didn't get, we split up.

My father took Leander and Clancy to see the mysterious blue amber, but Keenan decided us girls would find the process of extracting the resin too mind-numbing, and frog-marched us with the children back upstairs, to a closet.

By "closet," they meant an expansive room packed with clothes, some folded in a giant floor-to-ceiling wardrobe, some dangling on hangers, and some on mannequins by the windows. It reminded me of a tailor's shop I had passed once back home, with the best on display, and the inside spacious, with seating for those accompanying the clients.

Stuffing my irritation into a drawer, I gave into my fascination with both the magical and the mundane in our surroundings, considering I hadn't been allowed exposure to either, because of my parents—

And I was getting angry again! I still had so many maddening questions unanswered.

Before we headed for Spring, I had to get answers for who Belaina, cousin to the queen, had been, and what she had done to tumble all our lives this far downhill. And why she had named me Bonnibel.

"You can't do that." Jessamine was waving frantic hands and wings at Keenan, who held a sea-green dress in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other.

He snipped the blades of the scissors dramatically. "Yes, I can."

"Then you *don't have to* do that!"

His grin fell into a confused frown. "You want to show up to my family's ball, in front of all our guests, in those rags?"

Jessamine wrung her hands, shoulders hunching up and wings folding miserably. “I don’t expect to show up at all.”

“Why not?”

“You just said, it’s your family’s ball, in a queen’s castle!”

“Manor.”

I chose that as my point of entry. “Why don’t you live in a castle?”

Keenan made a displeased face. “Castles are for people who expect to be attacked, needing the height and fortifications on top, with towers to hide in, and guards to man the battlements. This is a home, for us and our staff. But I still pity the fools who would try attacking our Court.”

“*If* they get through your woods intact,” I added, to his approval.

“Exactly. They’ll first have to deal with all the beasties that live around.” He nudged Jessamine. “Now turn around so we can fit your wings through this dress.”

Jessamine spluttered, looking terrified of the bundle of silk, as if it was a snake about to strike her. “Why can’t I just put a big one over my head?”

“And look like a hunchback? How will you dance with Shaggybritches like that?”

She turned bright pink. “Won’t anyone object to us? To a lord dancing with the help?”

He just shrugged. “Your world’s rules don’t apply here. Now, hurry up.”

Swallowing, she turned and raised her arms for him to pull the gown over her head and make slits for her wings.

Her extreme misgivings seemed to vanish the moment he pulled them out. Seeing the way she rushed to a full-length mirror, running reverent hands over the green silk and turning to check the beaded pattern of the skirt from all angles, I couldn’t help the bit of fondness that surfaced for Keenan. He was mischievous, and maddening, but not malicious.

Bursts of childish cackling made me swirl around, only to find Ella being buried under a pile of assorted clothing items by the twins.

I lifted a floppy pin hat to check for her face. “Find anything in there?”

“Everything here is red, orange, or green. But Fiona and Finny insist there’s a pink dress in here somewhere.” Her hand stuck out from under an itchy woolen shawl, holding a white, pearlescent coronet. “But I found this. It should suit any color I settle on.”

“I suppose vivid colors best suit their skin tone here.” I started digging her out as the twins tossed more clothes onto her pile. Along the dig, I found a copper choker set with glittering green leaves and its matching bracelets. The pink dress showed itself, not within the pile, but when Fiona tossed it over my head.

With Ella rushing away the to try on her gown, I snuck up behind Jessamine and slipped on the choker. “Goes with your dress, doesn’t it?

She only stared at her reflection in wide-eyed silence as I put on the bracelets, too. I would have searched for a matching coronet, like the one Ella had found, but I had a feeling the tiara Clancy had taken from her would resurface tonight.

Slowly, she felt up her hard, curving nose, the edges of her rounded eyes, and then the choker. “I wish—” She clamped her mouth, lips between her teeth.

“Wish what?”

“Wish I could have gotten this chance before I became this.” Her wings fluttered before resettling behind her, their feathers suiting the color scheme of this court and her dress. “I’m happy that we’re here, that I saw a world beyond my own small, stifling one, and that I’m allowed to attend tonight. But I just wished that, should I ever dance with him, it would have been as ourselves, not as what we’ve been forced to become.”

My heart strained for them, threatening to snap its own strings. They deserved to have their time together, at least to enjoy themselves tonight, and it was shame they couldn’t do it in their own skins.

And Leander—would he even attend at all? And if he did, would he talk to me? I didn’t have much hope, considering how distant he’d been all morning.

Ella came up behind us, wearing a white dress, her hair held off her face with the glimmering band. The flowing skirt and the glittering top half, closer to silver than white, made her looked as if she was swathed in frost.

“What happened to the pink?”

She waved. “It was more of a nightgown, and I don’t think your aunt would appreciate her last-minute invitees looking like they just sleepwalked into her party.”

Keenan’s reflection towered above ours. “It would be a good prank, though, showing up barefoot in wrinkled sleepwear.”

Ella bravely elbowed him. “Is that all you think about? Riling people up?”

“It’s not my fault if you all have no sense of humor.” Keenan patted me on the head. “Where’s your dress then?”

Earlier, I had browsed the room, but the lack of blue or pink dresses, the colors that flattered me most, had posed a problem. I could seek out white like Ella had. But I didn’t want to intrude on her moment tonight which, from what she told me, would be the first time in ages she’d be at a party *not* as a server.

Taking another look around, I saw a mannequin around my height, standing by a curtained window. I didn’t know how I hadn’t noticed it before.

I headed towards it, enraptured, and pulled on the tassel, drawing the curtains apart. Autumn’s warm light spilled in, illuminating the material it wore.

It was yellow, a ball gown made of spun sunlight. Its top was delicately worked in dense beads and crystals, with an off-shoulder neckline, and its skirt was flared with fluffy layers, with the same embroidery swirling densely around the bottom.

It was beautiful.

“Good choice.” Keenan undressed the mannequin before holding the dress up to my neck, eyes narrowing in critical consideration. “But be warned, if you get this one dirty, my sister will kill you.”

I didn’t even consider being intimidated. This was the dress I’d wear, no matter what.

I grabbed it and rushed back to the mirror. “It’s hers?”

“It’s more than that. She wore it at her engagement party. Apparently, it holds a lot of feelings in its skirt.”

Pressing it to my body, I could almost feel those feelings emanating from it as I watched my reflection, its splendor dazzling me more by the second. “Any significance to the yellow?”

“For us it’s the color of change, when leaves turn yellow before falling off, and later being replaced by more of the same, but not quite.” He tucked my hair behind my ears, reminding me of their points. “It’s comforting, knowing that no matter the stages life goes through, even if parts of it wither, if cared for and nurtured, it will bloom again.”

The same, but not quite. That’s what I was now.

But caring for someone, and nurturing feelings for them couldn’t make a rose tree bloom again, could it?

HOURS LATER, I STOOD LOOKING DOWN AT THE PACKED BALLROOM overlooking the bonfire circle and the awaiting wicker figures. It blazed with golden light, lively chatter, and exuberant music.

Enthusiastic clapping now joined the energetic beat and the nimble strumming of the musicians who danced in circles around Rowena. She wore a wreath of oak leaves to go with her flowing ruby dress and curling red hair, and Ossian wore a complementing, earthy-brown ensemble. He twirled her about the center, singing along with the audience, while she laughed delightedly at their homage.

It was a scene straight out of my books. The seasonal celebrations the characters partook in, but with far more life and detail than I could have ever imagined. And my spot at the top of the spiraling stairs was a perfect place to observe the whole scene.

But I hadn’t come all this way to simply observe.

Ella had long beaten us downstairs, grudgingly escorted by Keenan and more interested in following the trays carried about by those enchanted giant rabbits than dancing with him.

Jessamine had remained glued to my side, intently searching the room.

“Where is he?”

Her complaint shattered the magic of the moment. Leander, Clancy, and my father were late to arrive, and no one knew why.

The first dance ended and applause stormed, before everyone broke their circles, seeking out partners for the next round, or going in search of food. That was when I spotted my father as he went to his brother’s side, and Clancy’s horns. He emerged from among a group of fair-haired, tan-skinned fairies from Summer, in a dark-grey coat, holding a broad, mahogany box behind his back, neck stretched up to search his surroundings.

“He’s looking for you.” I shoved her. “Go!”

Swallowing nervously, Jessamine slowly descended the steps, hands shaking so hard they rattled her bracelets. When she reached the bottom,

Clancy spotted her and waved her over just as the music began to pick back up. I didn't get to see what happened after they reunited, as couples began dancing at a ridiculous speed around them like jeweled, multi-hued whirlwinds.

Among the swirl of constant movement, I spotted Leander in the distance. He wore a navy-blue coat with a golden collar and copper buttons, his hair tied back, and a sinister expression.

Catching my breath in suddenly tight lungs, I made my way down.

Halfway to the bottom, I found him staring up at me, and was convinced he was about to avoid me again. But, as if in spite of himself, he approached me. Then he held up his hand.

Trading the bannister I was gripping for his palm, I couldn't help the anxious smile I gave him as he helped me down the last steps. For the first time since I'd met him, he was wearing clothes that fit his imposing frame, his hair and beard appeared trimmed, bringing more attention to his harsh features. Here, among the fairies, the giant animals, and the other peculiarities attending, he had no reason to hide within his hair. It was also why I had mine arranged half-up, baring my ears.

But his eyes weren't aiming unsettled glances at their pointed tips. They were firmly on my face for the first time since I had undergone my transformation. Relief ushered out the breath I'd been holding, and was replaced with an even lighter, fluttery feeling as I realized his expression was not shock but awe.

"You look like a tulip," he said, before rushing to add, "I meant, the dress—the color reminds me of tulips…"

He stopped, winced, waving his long, bony fingers. His claws had been pointlessly trimmed, already growing back to their previous sharp, clawed length. His frown was seemingly aimed at his own gracelessness. To me it was very endearing, nostalgic of the times he'd tried and failed to flatter me.

He finally sighed. "You look even more beautiful than usual. And that dress complements you greatly. It does remind me of the tulip fields they have in the Northland Kingdoms, especially in Orcage."

Now he wasn't trying to make me like him for the sake of breaking the curse, his compliments felt totally genuine. My lips wobbled as I smothered a nervous giggle. "I thought you said Arbore was the flower capital of the world."

“I meant we have the most variety. Other places have their staples, of course, but not as many cultivars.” He held his hand again to me. I barely stopped myself from pouncing on it.

As he led me away from the stairs, I loved how the skirt swooshed and swayed around my legs, as if magically responding to my every movement for maximum effect.

At the edge of the dance floor, he stopped. Before I could say anything, he bowed.

My hand grew so clammy it almost slipped from his.

He was asking me to dance?

He straightened, eyes gazing into mine with an edge of uncertainty.

To soothe his worries, I almost shoved him among the dancers, heart clattering along with my feet to a chaotic rhythm.

After long moments of being swept into the flow of energy and liveliness enveloping us, he seemed to rouse himself from staring into my eyes and dragged his gaze down my dress. “Actually, it’s more a glaring sunflower yellow…” He stopped, groaned. “Whenever I try to say something I mean to someone who means something to me, I only end up *sounding* mean.” He shook his head. “I think I just came up with a new tongue-twister.”

I grinned up at him. “That’s not a tongue-twister, not really.”

“Then what is?”

“There’s ‘*Seircha works in a shoeshine shop, where she shines and shows all the shoes she shined in the shop showcase.*’”

“Seircha—she shines—shoecase shoes in a shineshop show and—” He huffed a chuckle, stuck out his tongue, literally twisting it. “I give up. Where did you learn that?”

“School. We had a ton of those on the playground, almost with every letter. Gave some of us, especially those with lisps, a hard time. I thought it a cruel practice, even if I myself did it best.”

“I suppose inheriting your uncle’s chattiness has served you in that regard.”

“And *that*—” I tapped his nose, now that I could easily reach it, “—is why I’ll be doing all the talking when we meet the Spring Queen.”

I felt him grow uncomfortable, his gaze sliding off mine and to our almost syncing feet. “Let’s not talk about her.”

“Then let’s talk about why you’ve been distant.”

“Distant? I’m standing right before you.”

I gave him a small kick through the layers of my skirt. “You know exactly what I mean. Last night you said you needed time to accept me being a fairy, but I actually feel you’re taking it a lot better than I have.”

That brought his eyes back to mine as the music around us shifted to a slower, smoother tune and a woman began to sing. To match the new pace, we moved closer to each other, my hands on his shoulders; his wholly encircling my waist.

It felt like the most natural, yet most wonderful thing in this world, or in any other.

I wet suddenly dry lips. “You once told me Robin was part fairy. Is that why you’re taking this better than I expected?”

“How did you expect me to take it?”

“Not sure. I at first thought you might throw me back into the water or slash my face.”

His gaze froze, the irises growing more vivid as his pupils constricted. “Is that what you still think I’d become with enough provocation? A mindless, violent brute?”

“I did think that of you before.” I bit my tongue then rushed to mitigate what I’d said. “You know I no longer think that of you! I just thought you might not be able to see beyond what I turned out to be, considering what fairies did to you and your family.”

He said nothing to that. Before I launched into another lengthy explanation, he pulled me back into his arms. My heart pattered in relief as he started swaying and spinning me. He soon had those around us clear a wide circle for us, my gown sweeping off the dark green marble and swirling in the air. Then with a slight grip on my wrist, he twirled me out to the swell of the string harmonies, then gathered me back.

He bumped us together as he enveloped me in his arms, wringing a delighted squeal from my depths, and the first hearty laugh I’d heard from him in ages.

“Can we do that again?” I shouted excitedly over the drowning music.

“How about like this?” He twirled me out again, but when he pulled me back, he lifted me off my feet and spun round and round, with air flying through my hair and the room blurring.

When he finally let me down, I stumbled on my feet, dizzy and clinging to him, spluttering with laughter. “That was a little excessive—

but such fun."

"I had to find a way to shake that idea from your head." He pulled me back into our earlier leisurely embrace, rejoining the rest in their dance. "Bonnie, it's not about you being who you are. I don't care that your mother was a fairy princess. I wouldn't care even if she was from the Court of the queen who cursed Fairuza and I, so—"

"She was a *what?*"

His eyes widened at my yell. "You didn't know?"

"No! No one told me that!"

"But you should have worked it out yourself. She was Queen Rowena's cousin. That makes her a princess."

"How does that even work? Isn't a princess just a king's daughter?"

He huffed. "Tell that to all the princes and princesses in Almaskham and Opona, who aren't the rulers' children. In a big royal family, especially one whose members live as long as fairies do, they have dozens of them lying around. Sure, in Arbore and other kingdoms they become dukes and duchesses and such, the farther down the line of succession they go, but considering the lack of those titles here…" He lifted his chin in Rowena's direction. "Prince Ossian told us that the queen and your mother's fathers were brothers, but it was Rowena who was the Autumn King's heir."

I goggled at him, unable to wrap my mind around the new revelation. "So, Keenan and I are what? Double-cousins?"

"Welcome to noble bloodlines, where you'll have to start flinging your own children across countries to avoid inbreeding and find new connections. Or, in some cases, prefer to marry down for new blood. Which reminds me …" He checked over my head, a strangely excited grin spreading his lips over teeth that looked bigger and sharper than ever. "Any minute now."

"For what?"

"Are you serious?"

A yell from behind me turned all heads.

I swung around to find Clancy, barely able to kneel on both knees, holding the mahogany box opened up towards a flabbergasted Jessamine. Inside, on ruby velvet bedding, a golden ring set with a huge, multi-faceted gemstone shone next to her rose-gold tiara.

“As serious as our condition,” said Clancy, voice raggedly solemn. “After years of being locked up together, with our bodies being stolen from us, with our own people trying to murder us, coming here and seeing all this and surviving so much showed me just how insignificant the rules that ran our lives are.”

Jessamine still had her hands on her mouth, eyes shining with tears of disbelief. “But what about the lady you’re betrothed to?”

“Even if I haven’t been declared dead, and she hasn’t married another by now, I don’t know her and I don’t want her,” he said in firm finality, before his face softened and his voice thickened. “I know and want *you*, Jessie. And before I risk dying again, I want to marry you, ensuring that we are never parted, now or in whichever future our fates lie.” He raised the box higher. “Jessamine Quill, will you marry me here, tonight?”

Eyes nearly black with overwhelming emotion, she sought me out and I flapped my hands at her, hopping up and down in place, unable to rein back an excited squeal.

Happy tears freely falling, she held a shaky hand to him. “Yes! Yes! I will!”

With a bleating whoop, he jumped upright, slipping the ring on her finger and the tiara on her head to thunderous applause from all. I doubted anyone clapped and screamed harder than I did.

Clancy picked her up and spun them around before launching them into a frenzied, uncoordinated dance of joy further down the room.

Turning back to Leander, I found him smiling sadly at them. “You both planned this?”

He nodded. “Your family helped. Prince Ossian prepared with the entertainers and the priests and found us the clothes, and your father took us to his old smithy here and made the rings. The queen supplied the diamond and is giving them their own suite here.”

He reached for me to resume our dance and I barreled into his arms, giving him the tightest hug I could. “I thought you said it was more likely for him to marry a selkie than a maid?”

“Well, she’s a harpy now, not a maid. And until he returns and reclaims his castle and title, he’s just a satyr, not a lord.”

“And when he does return to being a lord? What will happen to her?”

“If anyone tries to reject their marriage, they’d only risk the fairies’ wrath, whose priests sanctioned it. No one would dare trying to dissolve

their union. The only problem will be that, as the Duchess of Briarfell, she'll need to finish her schooling and learn how to start giving orders rather than taking them."

This had all been his idea. I just knew it. He was the one who'd worked out a solution for them. That was what all the whispering and secrecy had been about! It had nothing to do with me. And for once, I was glad that something had been kept from me, since the surprise had been incredible and its delight a hundredfold.

But I still had to know why he'd thought he shouldn't share his plans with me. "Why didn't you tell me you were planning this?"

"I feared you wouldn't be able to keep the secret from her."

I smacked his huge arm and cried, "I can keep a secret!"

He narrowed mischievous eyes at me. "Can you?"

"Yes!"

"All right then, how about we trade confidences, confessions we've never told anyone." He seemed so serious all of a sudden, making my heart flutter. My gaze wavered until he swallowed, and forced lightness into his, even wagged his eyebrows at me. "Leverage, in case one of us is ever tempted to divulge the other's secret."

"Deal."

"You first."

I opened my mouth only to close it again, stumped. I had never thought of myself as a complex person, and thanks to my upbringing, I'd had no chances for events and experiences I'd like to keep hidden. The worst thing I'd ever done had been considering leaving my island, without discussing the idea with my father first. The one thing I'd hidden was the suspicion of my status as a changeling. Until minutes ago, I hadn't even realized what he'd already known, the last major truth about me as the daughter of a fairy princess.

I shook my head slowly. "I don't have any. I'm an open book now."

"Oh." His face fell, as if he'd been hoping to hear something specific. "Never mind then."

"You can still tell me!" I clung to him as his gaze and tone grew distant again, as if it would bring him closer more than physically. "I'll repay the favor once I do have something deep and dark I wish to keep to myself."

Uncertainty marred his beastly face as he ran an absentminded thumb over the hand he held. He opened his mouth, only to exhale heavily, as if releasing his last hope. He closed it again and turned his head away, grinding his sharp teeth.

Concern crashed within me, and I reached up to him, needing to bring him back to me.

After a moment of hesitation, he lowered his face into my touch, hand over mine, eyes burrowing deep into my own. “Bonnie, I—”

A chorus of excited screams drowned him out as the guests started filing outside. Some carried Jessamine and Clancy over their heads, chanting, “Priest! Get them a priest!”

Shrieking with excitement, Ella caught me by the wrist, pulling me away from Leander and out to the bonfire before I could even object.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Outside, night had fully fallen, blanketing the realm in its fathomless, velvet shroud.

The cloud cover had parted, leaving nothing in the sky but stars washed out by the golden rays of a massive, rising full moon. Most everyone had kicked off their shoes and were running around, pouring drinks for one another from silver jugs or lighting each other's torches.

Ella ran off to get a drink, chasing one of the giant rabbits.

The first to approach the pile of wood in the middle of the expansive clearing were the royal family. My father left them halfway to head towards me, looking hopeful as he held out a second torch.

"It's tradition for the ruling family to kick off the fiery celebrations," he told me as I accepted the flame. It was the first time he'd ever handed me something potentially dangerous, as if he was finally trusting me.

When I found my voice, it came out a bit crankier than intended. "Did you know Mum was a princess? Of course, you did! Why am even I asking?"

He flinched. "Bonnie, I really am sorry. All these years, I've wanted to tell you, but as long as we lived among humans, I couldn't risk it. The possibility of them finding out and reacting in extreme or even lethal ways was too high."

"I understand, but I'm not happy about it," I said with a sigh. "I know you both had your reasons, but I wish we never had to live like that, that I could have been born and raised here, as myself, growing into this body, among family. I'll never stop feeling like I've had that life robbed from me."

“Maybe it’s not too late to do all of that now,” he suggested. “We have no reason to return to Ericura—at least I hope we don’t.”

“You really think that whatever Mum was fleeing isn’t a problem anymore, if it was at all?”

“That’s one secret I wish I knew. I could only speculate, and even when she was sick and fading before my eyes, she never told me what it was for sure. She only told me that I had to protect you, and to stay in the human world after she was gone.” A haunted look came over him, and he ran a hand over my head, smoothing my hair. “I believe she was cursed, but even after escaping to Ericura, it caught up with her, cutting her time with us short. I feared the curse would carry over to you if we came back. But Rowena assured me that curses end with the accursed’s death.”

Deep sorrow sank its hooks into me, making my lower lip tremble hard enough to stutter over a question I’d wanted to ask since last night. “Who’s Yulian? Every time his name came up, you looked uncomfortable, almost guilty.”

He exhaled raggedly. “Yulian is the King of Winter, and he was your mother’s suitor, but she left him to escape with me. And from what I’ve heard, he’s been very sick for a long time now. As I said, I have suspicions, but if you want the real story, you’ll have to ask your aunt, since she might have all the details.” He turned away, watching Rowena shout something, only for everyone to echo it back to her as she tossed her torch into the firewood. It instantly caught fire, growing bigger and bigger as Ossian threw his torch in next, followed by their children.

Taking my hand, he rushed towards them.

He threw his own torch to more cheers and shouted, “Go ahead!”

Letting out a wary breath, I flung my share into the bonfire. My contribution as the last member of the royal family spelled doom for the wicker figures, as the partiers surged towards them, giddily setting each one ablaze.

Their flames roared into the sky, undulating their lethal dance in the wind, their heat bathing my skin. Through their gaps, I saw the crowd tossing Jessamine and Clancy up and down and Keenan trying to convince a reluctant Ella to accept a torch. Leander emerged from the crowd, leading a priest dressed in flowing white robes and an askew wreath to our friends.

Music blared again and I gathered my skirt and rushed to their sides, joining the people who formed a rotating ring around them, as the priest bound their hands in a scarf and they repeated vows after him, through the widest smiles their faces could manage.

Across from me, having been roped into the nuptial dance, Leander kept his gaze on the couple but once they said “I do” he suddenly met my eyes. Considering the moment, and how he’d helped orchestrate it, I thought he’d be in higher spirits. But as he stepped back once the ring halted for everyone to throw their hands up in raucous cheers and praise, he seemed more dejected than I’d ever seen him.

I wanted to chase after him, but I found myself caught by the arms and covered by wings as Jessamine squeezed me, babbling happily. I realized her arms were fusing completely with her wings, but I held my tongue. The last thing they needed as newlyweds was to be reminded of their worsening conditions and approaching mortality.

’Til death do they part could wait—*would* wait.

“Congratulations, you two.” I stepped out of her feathery enclosure, chest tight, eyes warm and aching at the sight of them, in gold cloaks that had been tossed on their backs, with matching flower crowns and giddy smiles. “I can’t wait to see your castle when we return. You need to show me what a proper Arborean wedding reception is like.”

Clancy’s smile grew dim and her joyous flush faded. They didn’t believe they’d ever make it back.

Forcing my smile to brighten, I added, “But till then, what better honeymoon could you have than one under the Harvest Moon?”

They shared a shocked glance, and Jessamine grasped his hand with the one that now bore the diamond ring, not white but closer to the hazel her eyes once were. “What are you saying?”

I reached for both their hands, squeezing each tight. “That you should stay here, enjoy your time together, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

Clancy shook his head. “We can’t leave you. We came here with a purpose.”

“Jessie came to get away from Arbore, and you came to keep an eye on all of us, but that’s not necessary anymore.” I offered them my most reassuring grin. “Besides, I’m sure Ossian and the twins would love to play hosts.”

Both seemed at a loss how to object again, aiming distressed looks at me.

I shooed them. “Enough with the long faces. Go! Be merry!”

Looking conflicted, Clancy began leading her back to the celebrations as he said, “In my case, I can’t help the long face.”

She reached an urgent, trembling hand for me and I grasped it, mine shaking as much. “I’m so happy we met you, Bonnie. You did change all our lives in incredible ways, and I only hope that we meet again.”

I squeezed her hand, before letting it go, my throat clenching tight. “We will.”

Nodding once as a tear slipped down her right cheek, she retreated with her husband, her sweaty hand slipping through mine. Possibly the last time she’d even have hands.

Watching them become silhouettes against the roaring fire, I could see Keenan rush to pull them into the circle of dancing people. With a sign from him, the music changed, and he grabbed a lute and started to sing as he played it.

My jaw dropped as he belted out a heart-wrenching song of overcoming tragedy with unending love. I had never heard anyone sing so beautifully, and for it to be Keenan, was even more astounding.

Silence gripped the crowd as everyone fell under the spell of his performance, and Jessamine burst out in tears and threw herself into Clancy’s arms.

I stood mesmerized by the song for moments, before wiping away my own tears, the need to be by Leander’s side suddenly overwhelming.

As Keenan’s song came to an end and the crowd roared with applause, I moved further along by the burning figures as their smoke filled up the sky. But despite his size, Leander proved difficult to spot, even through two rounds of searching the area.

By the time I found my father and uncle sitting on a table carved from a massive tree trunk, drinking mead from wooden mugs, I was shaking with frustration and anxiety.

“Have you seen Leander?” I panted.

Mouth full of mead, Ossian pointed up at the manor.

I gathered my skirt at once and ran there. My father set his drink down and heaved up to his feet, rushing after me. “Is everything all right?”

“He seemed upset,” I gasped as we reentered the manor. “I need to talk to him about it.”

Inside, we found no one left but children, some servants carrying out more food and drink, and the odd hyperactive fox. I asked anyone I could catch if they had seen Leander, and the ones who had all pointed to the top floor.

I ran upstairs with my father behind me. As soon as I reached the bedroom hall, I kicked off my shoes with relieved moans. I ought to change into a simpler gown and footwear, then drag Leander back downstairs with us.

“Leander?” I called across his door. When I got no response, I reached to knock, but the door was ajar and creaked back slightly under my hand. Calling for him again, I peered in.

The room was empty. And the clothes he’d worn to the ball lay discarded on the bed. I could only think it meant one thing.

Leander was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There was no sign of Leander anywhere in the manor, or the grounds, or along the Pumpkin Path.

No one had seen him leave, and he hadn't spoken to anyone about it.

After a long and fruitless night of searching, I was back in the manor in the main sitting room with my father, Ella, and the queen with her fox snoozing on her lap. Keenan and my uncle hadn't returned yet from the search. Clancy and Jessamine had been put up in their own wing, and the twins were asleep, as were most of the Court and guests at this hour. Only one thought revolved endlessly inside my mind.

Could he have really left?

"We'll find him," my father assured me, a hand on my shoulder.

"I have the owls surveying all possible parts he could have traveled through," Rowena said, stirring her cider with a cinnamon stick. "If he wandered off the Path and something attacked him, we'll soon know."

The idea of him being out there, alone, surrounded by monsters, like that time with the redcaps, made me feel sick.

Ella poured hot cider from a bronze teapot for me and herself, and the sweet scent increased my nausea. "What could be stupid enough to attack him?"

"Lots of things." Rowena raised her mug, surveying us with worn-out eyes. "Let's hope it's something he can defeat as a beast with a man's mind."

I tried not to get offended at her comment. I failed. "He *is* a man."

Rowena shook her regal head. “Not for long, by the state of him. He was seen climbing the stairs on all fours tonight.”

My distress bubbled over so fiercely, I jerked, hitting my teeth with the mug.

I’d already noticed Jessamine’s almost merged arms and wings, and Clancy’s almost goat-like eyes. Could their state have accelerated, tonight of all nights? Did that send him into a panic and he got lost? Or did he just need to be alone while he got to terms with another level of deterioration?

Praying it was the latter explanation, that he’d he return, grouchy, hair covered in leaves, and still be my Leander…

The creak of the door made me jerk around, clattering the mug to the table.

But it was only a winded Keenan, leading an elk in with his father passed out on its back.

With a burst of blinding speed, Rowena shot from one end of the room to the other, her startled fox zipping around their ankles. “What happened?”

“We eventually found their wolf friend’s trail, heading into the mountains,” Keenan panted. “Father insisted we could find him, but it got so cold, I had to return us before he got sick. Even with the magic of the mate bond, he’s not exactly a fairy.”

My father rushed to help Ossian off the elk, offering him his robe. “If Leander has gone that far, then he’s not drunk, or confused. He knows exactly where he’s going.”

I went to press my warm mug into Ossian’s freezing hands. “And where’s that?”

“To resume our quest,” my father said. “Going through Winter, to reach Spring.”

That felt like a hard slap, leaving my cheek hot and throbbing, filling me with anguish.

He really *had* up and left us. Left *me*.

Why would he do that to me—again?

Fists clenched, I stormed out, heading for my room. “I need to catch up with him, and give him a piece of my mind.”

Ella scrambled after me. “Wait—you need to give this some thought.”

“I’m tired of thinking! That’s all I’ve ever done!” I went straight for the wardrobe. “It’s time for me to act!”

I rushed to change out of the ball gown. After I took it off, the memory of our dance tore through me with the idea that it might have been the last time I'd see him. But I refused to even consider this. I'd find him. No matter what it took.

When I finally returned, trussed up in the heaviest clothes I found, Ella was still standing in the doorway, concern etching on her brow. "No one here knows what's happening over there in Winter. And you might not be able to catch up with him there."

"Then I'll eventually find him in Spring, and I'll break this jar over his fat head!" I took it out of my bag, and the state of the rose inside offered me some relief. Most of it was still intact, only the petals on the bottom were drying out. We hadn't been here for long. I stuffed it back, and took out the silver mirror. "Show me Leander!"

The glass immediately filled with swirling light, fading at the center to show me a hulking figure trudging through snow-covered mountains, with a city topped by a crystalline castle in the distance.

"He's halfway to Midnight." My father's voice over my shoulder startled me. "If he keeps going at this pace, we won't find him."

"Not before the guards there do." Keenan had joined us, now wearing a fur-lined hat and coat. "Real bright fellow you got there, Bluebell—going into yet another Court without an invitation or an escort, after what happened in Summer."

I turned to him. "Can you escort me through, then? Please?"

He raised his gloved hands. "Way ahead of you. We can go now."

My father headed out of the room. "I'll go get dressed for Winter, then."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Keenan stopped him with a hand to his chest. "It's way too cold over there for your old, sorry—ancient bones. You're staying here and making sure your brother doesn't do anything stupid while he fights off the chill he caught."

My father goggled at him. "I can't just let her go!"

"Yes, you can." I caught him around the middle, setting my head on his shoulder. He instinctively held me tight. "Dad, I have to do this. I made a promise to him, to our friends, to everyone we left behind in Rosemead."

"But—but we just got here—after all these years…"

"Exactly, you need to rest, and you need to catch up with your family. You haven't seen them in ages." I hugged him tighter. "I'll be back as soon

as I fulfill my purpose. But I can't do either if you don't let me go." I turned my head up. "You need to let me go, Dad."

Conflict tangled his features. I was asking him to break an entrenched habit, a lifelong obsession.

That was exactly what he said next. "I—I can't help it, after years of worrying about your every move, I just can't bear you going where I can't reach you or check on you."

"That already happened in Arbore, and I was fine. I'll be fine."

Ella came up behind Keenan, now completely bundled up in white woolen clothes, pointing to my hand-mirror. "You can keep an eye on us with this."

"Us?" My father and I gasped in unison.

"Yes, 'us,'" she said firmly. "What do you expect me to do here while you're off seeing the rest of this world? Sweep the floors?"

I shook my head. "Ella, you can't come."

"I can and I will. I told you I'd help you with this, then find Ada, didn't I?"

That she did, and though I had enough on my hands to worry about, I wasn't about to impede the decisions she was finally making for herself. And I would be beyond grateful for the company.

My father accepted the mirror, hand shaking. Letting me go was testing him within an inch of his endurance and sanity.

He finally let out a ragged exhalation and choked out, "Promise me you'll be careful?"

I set a hand on my heart. "Promise."

He pointed the mirror at Keenan. "I'm trusting you with these girls, understand? If anything happens to them, I'll—"

"Make me firewood for your forge, I know, I know." Keenan waved his hands at us. "Now let's get going. We might catch your wolfman before they catch him in Winter, and turn him into an ice sculpture."

CHAPTER TWENTY

With bags of supplies and the iron poker among other weapons, Ella and I followed Keenan through the Pumpkin Path and onto the Mountain Pass, heading straight for Winter.

For the first time in my life, I was doing something unsupervised, with my father's grudging approval. But with four people less than we had first started, the quest had taken on a different, depressing feel. Lonely for my friends and anxious for Leander, I, for once, had no curiosity to look around, or questions bouncing inside my head. But I had to convince myself that this was for the best. Jessamine and Clancy would have some long overdue happiness together, and I'd catch up with Leander without worrying about them or my father.

"I don't understand," Ella yelled over the galloping of our elk steeds. "Why couldn't we just take one of the flying horses?"

"They don't like the cold!" Keenan yelled back, riding ahead on the largest elk. He patted its neck. "Fortunately for us, elks do, and they're peppy and cooperative. They won't take long to get us through the mountain."

I held onto my elk's antlers, knees digging hard into its sides to keep from flying off its back. The only time I had ever done something like this was when I'd stolen Maple from the Woodbine lodge. I'd ridden up to the castle, believing my father to have been sacrificed to a man-eating beast.

Now I was riding to save said beast.

The woods around us thinned, until we reached a barren stretch of ground at the mountain base. At one point, the temperature seemed to drop

from one foot to the other. But the cold really began to seep through my wool-lined clothes and into my bones as we passed between two snow-capped mountains. I'd never even imagined anything could be that high. I was looking up at them, and my mind couldn't wrap around how towering they were. It felt as if their summits pierced the sky.

The terrain grew more rugged, making our ride more treacherous as we weaved through the Pass, the stomps of hooves echoing up to the peaks. We rode for what felt like ages with no end in sight, making me think we should have taken Leander's path over the mountain itself.

As if proving me wrong, a new landscape materialized before us, a slope down to an endless expanse of lofty, tapering, silver trees.

At first glance, they looked covered in snow. But when we rode down through them on a winding path, I found they had metallic trunks and crystalline leaves.

Exiting the crowded forest, the ground flattened and the path we were on was revealed to be, not earth, but a frozen river. It got clearer as it wound into the distance to the first settlement we'd seen, baring masses of preserved purple and blue leaves in its depths. I was half fascinated by the glass-like appearance of our icy road, and half scared that the weight of our steeds would crack it and sink us into the freezing water. I'd nearly drowned enough times in this realm.

Keenan didn't seem worried as he led us towards the settlement. It looked like one of those quaint towns in my mother's snow globes, lying on flat ground, with snow constantly falling over its frosted roofs and swept off to the sides of its paved roads. It was currently being shoveled off by robust, fair-haired fairies. None seemed interested in even watching us pass.

We travelled faster between the houses, and under a curved bridge that crossed the ice river, taking us into the city I had seen in my mirror-vision of Leander.

The houses grew taller and closer together, as if huddling for warmth, with potted balconies growing perennial plants, and sidewalks built around trees that bore frosted fruit. Behind them, shops with glazed windows and snowy roofs looked like desserts dusted with powdered sugar. Plenty that sold heavy clothes, firewood, and preserved food popped up as we drew closer to the sparkling city center, where lifelike ice sculptures shimmered on massive pedestals in Winter's pale, pervasive light.

I couldn’t help shuddering as we passed beneath them, and not from the intensifying cold. According to Keenan, these sculptures could be real, hexed people and creatures, a fate that could await Leander if we didn’t find him in time.

Soon, we were in the exact spot where I’d seen Leander. On a path leading up to another mountain. On its summit, facing us, was the most breathtaking of all sights. A sprawling palace with towers that stabbed the heavens, made entirely of crystalline ice.

Wanderlust and curiosity returned with a vengeance, colliding in an unprecedented intensity, nothing like my urge to go through the Hornswoods, to seek out family and Arbore. I wanted to gallop up to see that miraculous structure up close, feel it with my hands, ask whoever lived in it a thousand questions. But I wouldn’t, even if I could. I had a mission to fulfill.

Night fell as we reached a part of the city made from blue ice, with houses perched on the lower mountain plateaus. Stars emerged briefly from among solid slates of cloud, their shine dulled by the moon. We eventually reached a less populated area overlooking a windy, winding lakeshore. We approached a stone dock where workers were unloading a steam ship onto massive sleds. Those were dragged, not by flying horses or elks, but by the biggest animals I’d ever laid eyes on.

On massive tree-trunk-like legs, they were covered in shaggy brown hair with big, flat ears and tusks that curved out beneath a long nose that hung almost down to the ground. One raised his to trumpet into the cold night air, as if signaling for the others to move. When they did, the ground shook.

Mammoths! What Leander had shown me a miniature of, on that day we’d had our first conversation!

Keenan had us retreat as the mammoths passed by in a line, with men in fur hats directing them in different directions. I watched with rapt attention as they walked past us, the ground vibrating, their large, fairy riders seeming tiny in comparison.

The spell broke when the last mammoth moved further down the road, revealing the people who’d disembarked from the ship.

“It’s them!” Ella’s scared rasp echoed my shock. “Bonnie—it’s Dolora and her daughters!”

Standing on the dock, being inspected by guards stationed by the remaining goods, were Ella's stepfamily. In a less horrifying form than before, but not quite human, either. They were draped in fineries, with Dolora doing all of the talking, growing more aggressive as the conversation went on.

It seemed that she was haggling with the guards, pointing up at the ice palace.

"We should go back, look for him another way." Ella trembled, as if the sight of them made her shake harder than the weather.

"If he's going to leave Midnight, it's going to be on a ship heading east," Keenan hissed, vapor puffing out his mouth like pipe smoke. "Unless he'll try taking the lethal way there."

"Which is?" I asked, foreboding thumping in my chest.

Keenan pointed up to the highest peak. "Crossing the range to the greener end in Spring. Most who try this become frozen corpses to be found by skiers the next year—or century."

"I can't stay here." Ella began to turn her steed, heading into the alley between the shops. "They'll find me. If they find me, they'll kill me!"

"Who? Those three? That's what you're scared of after all you've seen here?" Keenan grabbed at the back of her coat. "Come back here, you don't even know where you're going!"

ELLA SHOT OUT OF REACH, GALLOPING AWAY, FRANTIC AND SHRILL WITH terror. "I don't care, as long as they don't find me!"

It seemed they had. As Keenan took off after Ella, Dolora and her daughters were sniffing the air. Then she snapped her head in my direction, her eyes turning black as she recognized me.

Abandoning their debate with the guards, the three of them launched themselves after me, baring sharp teeth in furious shrieks. All I could do was turn tail and gallop after my friends.

"Ella! Keenan! Wait!"

Between the shops and houses, zigzagging alleyways were slippery with sleet. In the distance, I saw Ella, taking a sharp turn up a higher road that made her elk's long legs almost buckle. Keenan shot after her, yelling for her to get a grip, and that we could take on her stepfamily. But reason had no place where these people were concerned. They had awakened a

visceral fear in her, and she was going to avoid them, even if it meant getting lost—or worse.

I lost sight of my friends, but was almost out of the alleyway when a hand gripped my hair, unseating me with a stab of pain in my scalp.

I hit the ground on my back, reaching up to frantically grip the arm that held me to ease the pull on my head. *"Let go!"*

Dolora screamed in my face, nails digging into my flesh. "You. You ruined our lives in that island, just when they began to match up with the ones we had here. And you and your father stole the girl from us."

I reached into my bag, gripping the iron poker. "I remember. Do you remember this?"

Confusion gripped her for a second, and that was all the time I needed to smash it into her face. The hiss of burning skin and the steam that rose off the metal was satisfying, but nothing compared to her agonized yowl of pain as her grip released my hair.

For good measure, I slammed it on her knees, and swung at her daughters' heads. "That's what you wanted to do to Ella's face, and it's the least you deserve!"

But I didn't have time to teach them a lesson. My elk had run off, and if I wanted to catch up with my friends, before Dolora regained her strength, I had to run.

Bolting away, hearing their shrieks getting closer, I struggled uphill, cold air shearing through my burning lungs. I was getting closer to the bottom of the mountain, feeling that I'd lost them, when I saw something that almost sent me sprawling to the icy ground.

A gleaming silver sled was flying down a hiking path, pulled by reindeer that galloped in the air. Holding their reins was a pale-haired young man in the thinnest clothes I had seen in this Court.

He stopped dead in midair when a large man bundled up in smothering clothes ran out seemingly from nowhere, waving his arms around and yelling.

Leander!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A crippling stitch in my chest and burning eyes watering, I stared at Leander as the sled lowered into a hover and approached him.

Where did he come from? Who was this man he was talking to? I needed to get closer, catch him before he flew away with that man! But I felt as if I couldn't run another step in those shackling clothes and painful shoes.

Suddenly, I remembered what I was. I didn't need to run. I could jump!

Putting all my focus into summoning my newfound fairy strength, I pushed against the ground and leapt. The first few bounds weren't the precise arcs I hoped they would be, and they only got worse from there, but that was the best I could do on such slippery ground.

As I bridged the distance between us, Leander stopped talking, turning to aim startled eyes at me, the only parts of him visible in his getup.

"You!" I panted furiously as I touched down from one leap. "Have!" I took another leap. "A lot of!" Then a final bounce. "Explaining to do!"

He held out his arms too late as I landed, and I crashed into his chest, tearing a grunt out of him. "Bonnie—what are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" I tried to shout, but was too breathless. "I can't believe you abandoned me again!"

"I didn't abandon you!"

I wiggled out of his hold. "Then what do you call this? Going for a walk?"

He didn't respond, just stared at me, too much of his face covered for me to pry out his expression.

“Well? You disappear from the party right after our friends are married, you don’t even say anything to anyone or leave a note, you have us all searching for you, only to catch you escaping the Court by yourself. What is all this, if not leaving us all behind?”

He still said nothing, and it made my blood boil.

“If you don’t say something right now I’m going to wring your neck!”

“You’d have to reach my neck to do that.”

He’d once used almost those same words to tease me. It was one of the first instances when I’d realized he had a sense of humor. But now wasn’t the time!

This time I didn’t need to jump up, with him hunched over and me taller, to grip him by the coat collar. I bent him down to my level, shook him with all I had. “This isn’t funny, Leo! You really scared me!”

He gripped my wrists, steadying me. “I thought—you just—” He stopped, shook his head with a dejected sigh. “You should go back. You shouldn’t have followed me.”

“You’re right, I *shouldn’t* have followed you!” Anger made me forget the cold, heating my every inch. “I *should* have been *with you* when you left. We are meant to do this together. And you don’t even have the excuse of fearing for my safety like the last time.”

He only nodded. “I don’t have an excuse. I want to do this alone.”

“Why?” I yelled incredulously, shaking my hands in his face. “What could have possibly given you this stupid idea, now of all times.”

He seemed about to respond, but the man from the hovering sled hopped off, coming between us. Up close I realized he wasn’t just extremely fair like the other fey here. His skin had a blue tinge to it, like frostbite, and his lips appeared to be purpling like a bruise.

Eyes wide and cloudy, he reached a blue-veined hand out to me. “Belaina?”

Whatever else I had wanted to yell at Leander shattered like thin ice as I goggled at the man.

“You came back,” he said, not one emotion evident in his face or tone. Shock, anger or hope could have been fighting a ferocious battle beneath the surface of his blue-tinged, stoic face, but not their least trace broke through. “Belaina, you have to help me.”

I stared at his outstretched hand, feeling the very opposite of body heat radiating from him—a bitter, brutal cold. I felt that if he touched me, I’d

get frost-burned.

I slowly edged away from him, wracking my brain for an explanation, a response.

This man thought I was my mother. Why did he think she could have helped him? Could he be…?

Leander blocked the man's reach and spoke for me. "King Yulian, this isn't Princess Belaina. This is Lady Bonnibel of Autumn."

I didn't know which made my head spin faster, being referred to as Lady Bonnibel or this man being the mysterious Yulian, the one who'd been my mother's suitor.

Yulian cocked his head, eyes glacial as he sought mine. "You're her daughter?"

I swallowed, tongue dryer than the air, and nodded. "She passed a few years ago."

"You look so much like her. I thought she had come back to fix—" Something like a long-forgotten emotion flickered beneath the surface of his frozen features before it dissipated. He pulled back towards his sled. "I won't keep you, Prince Leander. The first ship to depart to Verdure is the *Nimbus*. Good luck with your curse."

Leander bowed his head. "And you with yours."

King Yulian flapped his reins and in seconds, his reindeer flew upwards, taking his silver sled up and away.

Only when he disappeared from our sight did I find my voice. "What was that about?"

Leander faced me, a steep hunch in his upper back. "Your uncle told me about him when we went to look for the blue amber. He said he'd heard Yulian patrolled Midnight every night, and I thought if I could meet him, he might be able to help, or at least give me advice. He told me that what happened to him isn't the same, and he believes I have a better chance at undoing my curse than he does his."

"And you couldn't have discussed any of this with me at the ball?"

He avoided my gaze. "It didn't seem like the time."

"Then when was? You took off, remember?"

"I'm sorry, I really am." This was the most detached and impersonal I had ever heard him sound. I could tell it wasn't on account of the surroundings or situation, but my presence.

What had I done?

“But?” I finally prompted.

“Nothing. I just thought it was for the best if I went on my own, no need to drag the rest of you farther than you’ve already gone.”

What had gotten into him all of a sudden? Did they give him some strange wine or tea like the sleeping aid that filled my head with all those exhausting dreams?

“Great work on that front, since three of us ended up here anyway.” I stiffened, hands flying up to grip my cold face. “Ella and Keenan! I lost them somewhere here.”

“Then we need to find them. Once we do, now that you know I’m fine, you can head back to your family.”

“That eager to be rid of me?” I pushed at him angrily. “Put your height to good use and tell me if you spot either of them.”

He tried to stand up straight, only to hunch back over with a groan of agony. It seemed he could no longer straighten. I jumped up a high rocky protrusion, but could scout nothing from that vantage. I jumped back to his side, and we walked down into the city, searching every alley in grating silence.

When I couldn’t bear it anymore, I asked again, hurt simmering, “Why did you just leave? And don’t say you didn’t want to spoil my night, since you did far worse by disappearing.”

He turned his eyes down from checking roofs. “I couldn’t think of a good way to tell you I’d leave on my own, and I couldn’t pretend we’d leave together at the end of the celebrations. I didn’t want the last thing I said to you to be a lie. So I just…said nothing.”

My anger dimmed, only to flare up again. As much as I appreciated his intentions, this wasn’t one of those times where maddening silence was better than a painful truth. I just knew there was another reason why he’d decided to leave alone. But what could possibly be so bad he would rather disappear than share it with me?

He exhaled heavily. “The idea was obviously better in theory. I left without telling you so I wouldn’t hurt you, only to end up hurting you even more, again. That’s all I seem to do, when I mean just the opposite.”

“You didn’t think the idea through,” I sniped. “And I thought I was the impulsive one.”

I raised my gaze and caught him looking my way, eyes crinkling in an unseen smile. “Looks like you grew on me.”

“Like a rash?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Considering this is the second time you try to shove me out of my quest, it seems I’m like an annoying growth you’d like to be rid of.”

“*Your* quest?” He let out a bitter laugh. “This is my curse.”

“And it was my idea to come here! My idea of how to break it! *My* promise to break it!”

“You’re not bound to that promise. I don’t blame you for the roses dying and cutting our time short. You’re free to do as you wish, to be who you were meant to be in Autumn now.”

“What did I say about everyone making my life’s decisions for me? From you, to my father, to my mother from beyond the grave! I’ve had it with you all!”

“It wasn’t my intention to…”

“*I don’t care!* We’re coming with you on that ship to Spring, and whatever lone wolf instinct you’ve suddenly been struck with, is not going to change that.”

A surprised snort escaped him. “Lone wolf?”

“Isn’t that what this is?”

Leander didn’t respond, his focus returning to the roofs on my side of the street.

I snapped my gaze up to find Keenan hopping over the alleyway like he had in Summer.

He came to a stop on one roof, red-faced and hatless. “Oh, good, you found him.”

“Where’s Ella?” I yelled.

“The moment I caught up with her, those three Unseelie fairies came out and fought me for her, and she ran again.” He doubled over, hands on his knees. “It could take all night to find her at this rate, and the nights here are long. I just hope I find her before the guards catch her.”

My heart thumped painfully. “Why would they catch her?”

“Did you forget what happened when you all first crossed here? No unaccompanied humans allowed, changelings or otherwise.”

I groaned, realizing how much worse this situation had just gotten. “Between the guards and her stepfamily, they could find her before us, and I can’t tell which is worse.” I touched my bag, feeling for the jar that held the rose. “How long would it take to search this city?”

“Midnight is far larger than the Pumpkin Path,” Keenan said. “I don’t think you have the time to search every nook and cranny here.”

“Both of you stay and search,” Leander suggested, too eagerly. “But I need to leave now, before the ship leaves the port.”

Keenan batted a hand at me. “You go with him! I’ll find her, and take her back home with me before you two get back.”

There was nothing I wanted more than to make sure her stepfamily never saw her again. But I couldn’t do that, and continue on my quest. I had to trust that Keenan would find her, maybe more easily without me. I had to go with Leander. Even if he clearly didn’t want me with him.

Wrapping my scarf tighter around my face, I waved at him. “Thank you, Keenan, for everything.”

“You’re welcome—now go!” He turned and sprinted across the roofs behind him.

Leander caught me by the shoulders, eyes frantic. “It’s not too late to join him!”

I gripped his hands as urgently. “It’s not too late to tell me what’s wrong!”

He didn’t. Instead, he dropped his hands to his sides in defeat.

Then, shaking his head with a deep exhalation, he held out a hand to me, claws poking out through the torn glove. “Hop on. It’ll be faster this way.”

“I can jump long distances now!” But I still sprang up and onto his back like before.

“I’m still faster—and stronger. Even in my old body, I’d be able to carry you like this.”

“Am I going to be carried from place to place a lot in the future?”

“It’s the least you deserve.” Then he broke out in a blindingly fast lope, with me clinging to him for dear life.

We barely caught the *Nimbus* as they were unmooring. With one final, massive leap, Leander had us stumbling onto the deck, just as they removed the anchor.

As the ship began to sail into the seemingly endless lake, I hopped off his back, and we headed to the bow. No one asked us who we were, and Leander told me it seemed in Faerie anyone could ride whatever boat they could board.

In spite of myself, I couldn’t help getting lost in our awe-striking, pristine surroundings. I’d never been near such an endless body of water, let alone enveloped by miles-high mountains

Leander settled beside me as we passed a mile below the ice palace. He seemed as spellbound as I was as he sighed. “It’s a shame we won’t see what that place is like up close, let alone on the inside.”

“We will on the way back.” His troubled gaze found mine, and I insisted, “The curse will be broken, and we’ll have all the time in the world.”

He pulled down his scarf to reveal his vastly deteriorated face. “Not all the time. I’d hate to return and find myself like King Herla, with two-hundred years passed and everyone I love gone.”

“Or a thousand, like my father.” I winced as I patted the jar through my bag. “Good thing we have this and two more back home.”

“Good thing I had you to think things through for me.”

My heart fluttered at the sadness in his eyes, my emotions for him resurfacing to rekindle the warmth inside me, replacing the one fueled by fury and frustration. I leaned into him with a long, deep sigh.

After a moment of stiffness, he sagged and drew me into the containment of his great body.

It was just us now.

And whatever his reason for not wanting me with him, it no longer mattered. I was here, and I would stay with him, no matter what. And it seemed he’d finally accepted that.

We only had each other to count on in the last and most important part of *our* quest. And we’d deal with whatever happened in the greener pastures of Spring together.

I hoped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We remained at the starboard bow as our ship sailed through the dark waters, taking in the moonlit, winter wonderland.

The city of Midnight, with its impeccable architecture and magical ambiance, now felt like an introduction to the serene majesty of the Winter Court. The undulating, snow-capped mountains literally took my breath away every time I dared raise my gaze to their peaks. They encased smaller towns scattered among the rugged valleys and sprawling plateaus like swarms of fireflies. We sometimes came closer to the shore where I could see their details. Log cabins and stone houses lay in exquisite patterns, and cobblestone streets were lined by trees that looked like rowan, ash, and yew, but weren't, with their blue and silver branches and leaves. Every now and then, a blue bear climbed onto the banks with a fish between its jaws and vultures swooped over the ground or water, looking for prey.

Above me was the greatest wonder of all, the canopy of eternity that enclosed the realm. While I'd always seen a few bright stars among countless dimmer flecks, Winter's sky was a dazzling mass of shimmering diamonds; their dust seemed to have settled on every inch of the land.

"Amazing," I whispered, committing every bit to memory.

"Of all the lands I've seen, the ones where winter reigns like this always seem to have an otherworldly quality to them." Leander rejoined me, holding two steaming steel mugs in one hand and a plate of biscuits in another. "Here's another thing I recognize—*glühwein*."

I gladly wrapped my cold hands around the hot cup. "Glue vine?"

He shook his head, no longer able to smile without looking like he was snarling. “It’s Northlander for *glowing wine*. It’s essentially the mulled wine we have every winter in Arbore, but with a few key differences.”

I knew what he meant as I bent to sniff my cup and its depths glimmered up at me, as if it had a miniature star within. Letting out a gasp of pleasure, I took a sip. I got hints of cloves, star anise, cinnamon, orange, and other tastes I couldn’t place in the warmth. “Have you traveled through places like this? Is that why you thought you could do this alone?”

He tugged his scarf further down to drink, his fangs now perpetually sticking out of his lips. “I have, but always by ship or by carriage into the cities. The countryside and wilderness were always a faraway glimpse as we sailed from one dock to the next.”

“The easiest way to travel the north of the Folkshore is by sea then?”

“For great distances, yes, it is.” He settled by me, looking out into the unhindered horizon. “I never got to visit the Mjallands or Opona, though, but I’ve heard they’re a lot like here, with mammoths, polar bears, and magic.”

“That’s the land with the wizard noble families?” Intrigue and the rush of the spicy drink put a damper on my lingering annoyance with him. I pressed back into him, needing his nearness, and to test his reaction. But again, he didn’t edge away from me, didn’t show any signs of discomfort. He just accommodated my weight, enveloping me into his strength and the heat rolling off him, making me feel safe and cherished.

He sighed, as if he too, delighted in our closeness. “Yes, all sorts of magic permeate their society, and in the Northland Kingdoms as well. It’s mainly the reason Arbore is at war with Avongart. Father outlawed magic after the Spring Queen cursed Fairuza and me, and decreed that anyone who practiced it would be imprisoned, or even executed, according to the extent of the offense. With the first sentence passed a few years back, King Ludovic took that as a declaration of war, since he considers his magic-using population to be as his allies before us.”

I took a gulp to alleviate the dryness that assailed my mouth. Disturbing thoughts about how people would react to me, especially his family, fed the pointless daydreams of a relationship that would never come to pass. “Do you agree with that?”

“I used to. I used to want all fairies shot with iron arrows, all witches tied to stakes and set ablaze to pay for whatever suffering magic has

caused my family and others. I used to think the people in the north, in Opona, and in Almaskham, were crazy to let these sorts live openly among them, give them power and titles." He shuddered, but not from the cold. "But now, especially since I have become a magical creature myself, I wonder how much of these cruel spells and insidious trickery are cast out of malice, and how much are in self-defense or vengeance."

"There are fairies like my uncle's family and there are ones like Ella's stepfamily," I said. "There are witches like my friend's mother and witches like the one who kidnapped her. Like there are stories of good kings and bad kings, they never seem to be about the power they have, but how they choose to use it."

"Until very recently, it never occurred to me that the magical kind were people like you or me, and they differ and react as we would." His gaze lifted up to the stars strewn across the heavens, like spilled glitter on the navy cloth of eternity. "Meeting your relatives, seeing their Court, hearing about your father's and uncle's lives, and the truths they kept from you, it has me rethinking my whole life, and every explanation my parents have given me about the curse."

Before we'd left Rosemead, he'd told me that the story his parents had given him and his sister made little sense to grown ears. It missed too many details, and had gaps of withheld information, just like my own life had been until these past few days.

"You think the Spring Queen had a reason, then?"

"She always had a reason. The question is whether it was something as trivial as the slight of not being invited to my sister's birth celebrations while lesser fey were, or the more serious but still unimportant motive of my mother's insulting threats, or if there was something more to it than that."

He tried to take a sip, but the red wine dripped down his fangs, his lips too rigid to curl around the rim. Growling in frustration, he lapped the liquid out of the cup instead.

He stopped, looking at me in horrified embarrassment. But like I had back in the castle, I gestured for him to go on, drink or eat in whichever way was easiest for him. To encourage him, I tossed the cup back, overfilling my mouth with the wine and letting the rest drip down my dress. We grinned at each other for endless moments.

He finally sighed as he hugged me closer. “I’ve been thinking about why this all happened more than ever in the last few days. Yes, my mother thinks of fairies as the genies from her land, who are supposed to be dangerous and devious, able to possess people and drive them mad. But I no longer know if they are all like that, or if there’s more to *their* story. And then, surely my father could have contained the situation when she was unthinking enough to threaten the Spring Queen. He’s a king, and being political and avoiding trouble with other monarchs is his job…” He stopped, winced down at me. “Who am I kidding? He started a war with our neighbors over abysmal magic laws.”

After a long moment of stymied silenced, he ran his hands over his face, claws completely cutting out of his gloves now. “How would you use them?”

“Use what?”

“Powers given to you, as either a fairy or a princess.”

I gaped at him. “I’m not a princess.”

“You could be,” he said, making my heart miss a beat, before launching into a flutter. His next words made it plop back into my chest with a thud. “If you stayed in Autumn instead of chasing after me, you could have been like your mother, a princess of the Court. A lady at the very least.”

“And what would I have done if I stayed? Fended off living nightmares in the woods? Overseen crops of magical pumpkin and shooed magical pests off the plantations while I waited for you to come back—if you ever returned for me?”

“I would have returned!”

“I didn’t know that! You want to know why? Because you didn’t say anything to me!” I turned in his hold, aggravation rising again. “You behaved oddly for a while, then you danced with me and it was wonderful and I thought—thought—then you disappeared and I—and you—*you still owe me an explanation!*”

He stared at me, stunned. “I told you.”

“No, you didn’t. You just said you didn’t want to lie to me about deciding to leave alone. You never explained *what* made you run off without me.”

His arms fell off me as he tried to step away. “It’s going to sound stupid.”

I pressed him back against the railing, poking my forefinger into his chest. “Try me.”

Taking in a deep breath, he downed the rest of his drink, as if for courage, drenching his beard, and met my furious gaze. “We once spoke about how I could name all of my relatives and ancestors, while you could only name one set of grandparents, one missing uncle, and didn’t know your mother’s maiden name. You were cut off from the world, no roots, no identity. Not even your name made sense.”

That lost feeling resurfaced for a breath, before it sank back down, its prior intensity having faded in the past days. “I remember, I was there.”

“And then you were here, and found all you’ve ever wanted. Family, answers about your link to Arbore, your parents’ meeting and your own identity. And there’s so much more you didn’t have time to unearth waiting for you in Rowena’s Court.”

His eyes filled with some fierce emotion as he attempted a smile, before giving up. He must have looked in a mirror in Autumn and knew the expression now looked more threatening than engaging. By now, the man had almost disappeared behind the mask of the beast.

But to me, whatever his face looked like, it was the one I couldn’t get enough of looking at. When I’d thought I’d never see him again…

Unable to complete that thought, I shuddered with the relief that I was looking at him now, that he was safe and with me.

But he appeared weighed down by something yet unsaid, and I wanted to shake it out of him. I barely constrained myself to nudging him to keep going.

He sighed. “At the ball, you looked so happy. Everything you dreamed of had been realized. When you said you had no secrets, no desires, I knew that you had found your place in the world. I knew then that to drag you away from there for my cause would be selfish, even cruel. I knew I had to leave alone. But had I told you of my intention, you would have insisted on coming, regardless. You’re that noble, that selfless.” He raised a hand, looked about to cup my face, before he dropped it, vivid eyes dimming. He huffed out thick clouds of vapor with a weary exhalation. “I thought that, especially in the festivities and the impromptu marriage of our friends, no one would notice my absence.”

Whatever anger I had felt at being left behind had been snuffed out by the tear-jerking tenderness of his motives. It flared again at the

ridiculousness of his misconception. “*I* noticed. At once! How could you think otherwise?”

He shrugged uncomfortably.

“There’s something else, I know there is.” I shook my head, sniffling back the suffocating emotion. “You’ve been acting strange before the ball, since we fell into the waters in the Equinox Games.”

“I told you, I needed time to accept you being a fairy.”

“That’s not it either, not entirely.”

“How would you know?”

“Because I know you!” I cried out. “I know what you’re like when you’re being yourself, when there’s something bothering you, and when you’re sad or angry or afraid! And I feel that you’re afraid now.” I reached out, setting my shaking hand on his. “Of what? You just said you don’t believe all fairies are malicious anymore.”

“I’m not afraid of you!” he growled, looking offended by the very suggestion. “I am of what you mean now.”

I threw my hands up and stomped my foot all at once. “What does that even mean?”

He dropped his gaze. “It doesn’t matter now—we’re heading to our destination, regardless.”

“This isn’t about the Spring Queen! This is about us!”

“There is no ‘us!’”

His outburst made my teeth ache and my heart seize, as if I’d been dumped into the frigid waters, and they’d forced their frost into my every organ.

As if belatedly realizing what he’d said, he jerked back with regret filling his eyes, his whole body seeming to deflate. “There can’t be an *‘us.’* And that’s the problem.”

“Th-That’s what all this is about?” My teeth chattered, and I had to grit them so I could continue. “My being a fairy is fine for you in general, but intolerable in a personal sense?”

His thick brows linked in deep-set bafflement. “What are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about?” I shouted, shoving my face up into his, my voice cracking with hurt and confusion. “Because that’s the only sense I’m making of your words right now.”

His moroseness evaporated in a flare of emotion rivaling mine in intensity as he rumbled, “I’m talking about the idea of you loving me as a common girl was a possibility before, but now it’s impossible.”

“I—what?”

My mind stalled, my eyelids twitched, everything in the whole world stopped.

I gaped up at him. I rocked on my feet. Then everything suddenly burst.

“You’re saying that you think I’d now find you more unlovable than I did when we first met? Not that you’re disgusted by my heritage?”

It was his turn to gape at me. “Why would I be disgusted by you being an ethereal, magical being?”

“Why would I change my mind about you after discovering I am such a being? What is your logic here?”

“I told you it would sound stupid!” he mumbled defensively.

“You’re right, it does!” I shoved at him, then I slapped his chest. “How could you think that of me? Believe that I’d be so flighty? That I’d toss my personality out like bathwater once I grew pointy ears and a few inches?”

“Can you blame me? Have you looked at me lately? That fairy queen made me look like this to make it impossible for someone to bear the sight of me, let alone the idea of getting to know me, of liking me. And the more time passes the further away I get from the old me. I am unrecognizable.”

“Really? Because you’re still the same bone-headed jerk I met the night I burst into your castle!”

“Are you telling me you don’t see a difference?”

I rolled up onto my toes, pressing my nose against his. “You keep saying you don’t care about the change I went through. Afford me the same courtesy of believing the same of me about yours.”

“If we were like Lord Gestum and Miss Quill, I would. They may be in different social classes but they’re on an equal level physically. But where I’m this…” He flung disgusted hands down his body. “…you are an unattainable, exquisite fairy. This isn’t the same.”

“Unattainable? *I’m* unattainable? *You’re* the prince!” I shouted, going hoarse. “You, as a king’s heir, are the definition of unattainable! Why do you think so many folktales are about princes marrying peasant girls?

Because, like you said, it doesn’t happen. Not without consequences that turn that tale into a tragedy.”

“Until this curse is broken, and I am reinstated as heir, I am only a nightmare no one would wish on any female. To be unattainable, you’d first need to be considered desirable, and without my title, or even my old form, I am *nothing*.”

“Not to me, you’re not!”

His pupils dilated until I could see my face reflected dimly within them. “Are you saying that to be nice? I know you always say what you think, especially before you think it through. But I’m having a hard time believing you’re being honest.”

“I’m saying that because I’m your friend.”

“Is that all I can be to you?”

Settling back on my feet, I felt the anguish in his voice clutching me by the throat. “Isn’t that what you wanted, when you suggested that we get to know one another?”

“That was a compromise, since it seemed improbable I could be anything more. It should be impossible, now your situation has changed.”

“What did I say about you making my decisions for me?” I tried hard to keep my voice steady. “You’re my friend—b-but that’s not all you are.”

“Then what am I, to you?”

“I don’t know—but all I know is that I can’t get enough of talking to you, of being with you, that I can unapologetically be myself with you, that you don’t judge me…” I had to pause to gulp a breath, before blurting out the rest. “I feel for you, so deeply, that when I thought that you tried to be rid of me, or that you’d never see me as me again, I felt so hurt, so lost. All I wanted was to get you to open up to me again, to find me through the surface changes, to look at me like you used to, like you know exactly who I am, and like everything about me, even the stupid and impulsive and unlikeable parts. And when I found you were gone, and I thought you might be *really* gone, overpowered by the creatures in the wood, or failing in your quest without me…I felt I couldn’t go on without you. I would have done anything to find you, to be with you again.”

He looked as if he’d forgotten how to breathe.

His brilliant, beautiful eyes shone with the silver of the stars and tears as he finally heaved in a shuddering breath. Then he dropped his head,

resting his forehead on mine, as we both panted with emotion for endless moments.

Then he finally spoke, his breathing still ragged, his voice a bass, reverent rasp. “With you, I wasn’t a prince or a monster, I was just a person. I was just me. A me I only discovered with you, butting heads and arguing about books, debating life and making confessions, like I’d known you forever. A me who made a pig of myself and joked and laughed with such ease. No one has ever felt as familiar as you do. It’s as if you’re a vital piece of me, the only one who is truly kindred.” He finally took a full breath, but it rushed out of him with more confessions. “When I started to feel something for you, I thought it would never be reciprocated. I settled for being friends, for the curse, and because I believed I could never inspire anything more in you. I knew you would one day leave, and I wanted you to, not because I didn’t want you around, but because I did, and I couldn’t bear the thought of you trapped again, by obligation this time.” He raised his head and reached out to push a lock of hair behind my ear, a shaking, clawed finger tenderly tracing its pointy outline. “All I thought about was keeping you safe, and reuniting you with the father I parted you from. Then I wanted you to be among everything and everyone you’ve found after years of wishing and waiting.

“But I was weak. I still hoped you harbored more than friendship for me, were driven to help me by more than nobility and obligation. And I asked if you had a secret, knowing that you’d tell me if you did, that it could only be feelings you haven’t confessed to anyone yet, maybe even to yourself. But you said you had no secrets, and I felt ashamed that I’d selfishly hoped you were even more involved with me than you already were, when that would only mess up your life and bring you nothing but heartache. So I had to go. I had to set you free.”

That roused me. I smacked him again. “And you will *never* make decisions for me again. You want to do what’s best for me, you consult with me first. From now on, I’ll decide what I think is best for me!”

He rubbed the sting from his chest with a grin that was alarmingly if delightfully full of sharp teeth. “Yes, m’lady.”

“*Also* don’t run and hide or walk away or send me away ever again.”

“What purpose would that serve, when you’d only find me again? And you found me, Bonnie. In every way, you found me. You made me find myself. And you’re with me again. The only one I can’t imagine life

without—don’t *want* a life without. Everything you said you feel for me and experience with me, is what I feel and experience with you, and way more. *Way* more.”

Every incredible word he uttered wound up my insides tighter, that I felt like a violin string about to snap.

Barely able to contain my tremors, I whispered, “So—what does all this mean?”

“It means that I love you, Bonnibel Fairborn, and I want to be in your life in whatever way you’ll have me.”

My heart felt as if it burst into a million pieces, red and pink confetti for a festival parade that danced up my tight throat and spinning head.

“Can I have you for good then?” I stuttered, teeth chattering, every nerve firing. “Because if after this is done, you return to the capital to marry a princess of Avongart for a treaty, or your mother rejects me for being a fairy, I don’t know what I’ll do with myself.”

“Avongart doesn’t have a princess, and I wouldn’t marry one if they did. And what you are will be the last thing on anyone’s mind should I return, whole and healthy, thanks to you.” He held my face as if he was holding the most precious thing in the world, warmth from his palms and gaze spreading to my frozen cheeks and insides. Then he dropped his hands, and fumbled inside his coat pocket. He pulled out something blue that reflected the starlight. A ring!

He held it up to me, a tremor shaking his hand and voice. “This is what I wanted to give you at the ball—the blue amber we went in search of. Its stone is native to your mother’s Court and its ring was made by your father, and best of all, it matches your eyes.”

“But the idea was wholly yours.”

I’d once refused his extravagant yet impersonal gifts. But this was uniquely personal, he’d found a way to fill such a small thing with so much meaning and love.

Tears wet my cheeks and lips as I gave him my shaking hand.

He slipped the ring on my finger with a ragged exhalation, before gazing solemnly into my eyes. “I meant it, Bonnie—I am yours in whatever way you want.”

I must have looked like a total, delirious fool as I beamed up at him, my smile so wide it hurt, swaying with elated disbelief. “I’ll hold you to that!”

“I’m counting on it.” His answering smile suddenly gave way to excitement as something above caught his eye. “I was hoping you’d get to see this.”

I snapped my head back—and gaped.

If the stars had been breathtaking, and his confession had made my heart soar as high as they were, the sight above us brought me back to our surroundings, bursting with wonder.

Bright waves danced above us, like windblown curtains of green light, a sight unlike any I had ever seen.

“What is that!” I gasped.

“Northern lights. You can only see them in a few parts of the world, and only in winter.”

“I can’t even begin to compare them to anything. I have never seen or heard of anything like this.” I leaned against him, and he lowered his shoulder for my head to rest on as I watched the strange rays undulate and swirl across the sky, like fluorescent, freestyle strokes of a paintbrush wielded by the gods, nature’s own celestial carnival.

“Fitting for our voyage, considering the feat we’re undertaking is unheard of.” He gently rested his head against mine as he gathered me fully into cherishing arms. “When we return, we’ll make a list of all the things you’ve yet to see.”

“We just need to get this last stop over with, then we’re free to see the world.” I reached up to stroke his face. “Though I wonder if anything could ever outdo this moment.”

“Nothing will ever outdo it, or any other moment I’ve had with you. I only wish and pray for as many more moments as possible.”

I dove deeper into his embrace, heart so full it made anything more than sighing impossible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As if heralding the realm of greenery and blossoms, the northern lights soon faded with the cold, ushering brighter waters and warmer shores with the first rays of dawn.

Gradually, the soaring, stoney mountains gave way to shorter, clay-brown ones. Their bases grew bluer with trees with dense leaves that danced with the sweet-smelling breeze, and blew petals before our ship. Soft light hit the glimmering waves showing the fish underneath, while ducks and swans gave us a wide berth, some shooting up into the sky, their feathers wet and pearlescent.

Deeper in, past the border of Spring, flora and fauna exploded with color and abundance. Antlered rabbits hopped in lush fields and rolling hills that ranged from sapphire to cyan to indigo, getting darker as they dotted the distance with forest thresholds teeming with multicolored wildflowers. Birds with curling tails sang in the trees, an entrancing harmony to the tune of the wind rustling their leaves, announcing the sun's ascension. But there was one thing missing from the landscape.

I rolled my head over Leander's shoulder, looking up at him. "I don't see any cities. Are they deep in the woods like in Autumn?"

"The captain…" A yawn assailed him. Having no free hand to cover his mouth, with both around me, it showed me how wide it had become, and the extent of his sharp teeth. The roses might indicate he still had months, but his deterioration said otherwise. He started again. "The captain said it's a surprise, when I went to get our drinks. But I'm expecting it to look more like Arbore."

"You're giving me a tour of your kingdom when we get back."

“First, we return to check on my staff, then we head to Eglantine to speak with my family,” he began, as he stepped away to wrap the scarf back around his nose and mouth. “Then once we’re betrothed, we can have a tour of the land and introduce the people to their future princess.”

That felt far more surreal than our surroundings. Not only did he love me, but our class and kind would be disregarded in favor of the bond this experience had forged between us.

It was almost too good to be true.

Shaking off the pinch of foreboding, I fell back into our companionable silence as the ship made a turn into shallower waters. Strangely, it passed a boardwalk that led into woods with blue-green trees, and instead, headed towards rocky cliffs that created corners for us to navigate. Their tops were spread with tall, swaying, blue grass, and boulder-brick houses. The odd signs of life carried down from above—the laughter of children, the barking of dogs, the caws of hawks. The sound of rumbling water grew closer as we approached the highest cliff in sight.

As we rounded its corner, the source of the roaring water came into view, a towering waterfall roaring off its edge.

Before I could even form a thought, the ship hurtled into the watery curtain.

I clung to Leander, squeezing my eyes shut, anticipating a fatal crash into the cliff.

But the agonizing and pointless end I expected didn’t come to pass. I felt nothing as the sound of water battered something above us, then the continuous rush of the waterfall resumed.

My eyes flew open, frantically checking Leander first. He was looking down at me with equal urgency. We were both untouched—and totally dry. Not a drop of water on either of us.

There must have been some magical barrier around the ship as it forged through the waterfall. Now, we were wading beyond it into a dark tunnel, where the only illumination came from dots on the craggy walls, bouncing off the waves beneath us to create webs of rippling light.

Suddenly, a starburst flare ushered us into a wider, brighter landscape leading to a dock surrounded with gnarled trees with purple trunks. Their boughs spread horizontally and rained gigantic curtains of lilac flowers gleaming with a metallic sheen.

As we disembarked, Leander held back, talking to the captain. I walked ahead, looking around, almost tempted to climb one of those trees and nap on its bough.

Leander came behind me, gently squeezed my shoulder as he pointed to a winding road that led east into the woods. “He said we can reach the queen’s castle through there.”

I turned from watching a unicorn herd racing through a nearby field. “Just like that? We can just saunter up to her gates and be let in?”

He stalked after me, the hunch in his back worse than when we’d boarded the ship, arms appearing longer, like he was ready to drop on all fours permanently. The sight of his body so warped made me feel like someone was stepping on my stomach.

“The captain’s exact words were ‘If you can reach it, you’re welcome in’,” he said, voice now almost constantly the rumble of a predator.

“And that’s not strange at all?”

He swept a hand at our surroundings. “Fairies. What else would you expect from them?”

“I expect some rules, at least some level of reason. This being a half-fairy business is going to take more getting used than I thought.” I pulled at my collar, already beginning to sweat underneath my winter clothes. “Shall we go?”

“Do you mind if I…?” He clenched and unclenched his large hands, looking pointedly at the ground. “I can’t walk straight for long anymore.”

I hid my horror at the confirmation of his snowballing decline in a too-wide grin as I continued walking. “Go ahead, race the unicorns if you wish.”

“They’re likely to pursue and trample me,” he said as he settled down on all fours, reminding me how he’d once told me they could be vicious, ending my rosy view of them. His words sounded humorous, but it was difficult now to gauge his mood from his rumbling tone.

“Then race me!” I said and hurtled forwards in a dead sprint.

Slightly uncoordinated at first, and probably embarrassed, too, he picked up a loping rhythm that soon easily surpassed my pace.

He slowed down to let me catch up as he led us into a darker passage, packed with neat rows of those black trees that created crossroads. We took the direct path bordered by mounds of lilac petals and cyan grass.

He looked up at me, and my heart twisted at finding his nose now elongating into a snout, his sharp jaws open as he panted. “I raced a unicorn once, on horseback.”

“Was your sister riding hers?” I huffed as I struggled to take off my coat.

“Yes, she’s quite proud of turning her luxury pet into a functional one. It tried to impale me.”

I laughed at that. I felt his humor, and fondness. I didn’t need to hear or see anything in his voice or expression to know how he felt anymore.

“I can’t wait to meet Fairuza and the rest of your family. And to ask Adelaide how they ended up in that place together, and what happened afterwards. We’re going to have so many stories to trade once we reunite.”

He slowed his pace, hanging his head lower to the ground.

“What is it?”

“I don’t think Fairuza will have long by the time we return. It seems that Cyaxares has either rejected her, or is making her jump through too many hoops to regain her status as his betrothed. If he doesn’t marry her, her curse will take hold soon.” He let out a frustrated growl as he looked up at me, conflicted. “Do you think once you vouch for me, maybe we’ll be able to make a case for her, too?”

I didn’t know what to tell him. I wouldn’t want to give him false hope.

All I could say was, “We’ll see, I guess.”

I took advantage of our slower pace to rummage in my bag for the jar, only to feel my hopefulness dip further. The number of blue petals at the bottom had more than doubled since I last checked. The stem had wilted, and the remaining petals left the rose more bell-shaped. More like a bonnibel.

I was so caught up in reminding myself of the two other flowers back in Rosemead that I barely noticed Leander raising his head, his ears and nose working warily. “Do you hear that?”

Listening intently, I searched the spaces between the trees for any sign of movement.

I only heard the low groans of straining wood, just in time to see the trees uproot themselves!

Before either of us could react, a branch came swinging at my head.

In pure reflex, I leaped back, crashing into Leander. He set me upright in time to see the roots, climbing out of their holes in the ground, braiding

into legs, while boughs warped into arms, and twigs into spindly fingers.

One such wooden hand shot towards me, clawing for the jar in my grip.

Shock melting under the brunt of panic and survival, volition shot into my legs full force and I bolted down the road.

Leander hurled himself ahead of me, swinging his massive arms left and right between bounds, beating back the animated trees' attacks. Trying not to spoil his efforts by stumbling, I weaved and bobbed, dodging the wooden arms that made grabs for me, and ducked underneath the still distorting boughs.

But we couldn't outrun the wave of transformation. Soon, all the trees were replaced by humanoid wooden beings. Their faces, with droopy eyes and gaping mouths, formed out of the pale yellow heartwood beneath the cracking purple bark that became their clothes, the lilac cascades of flowers becoming their hair.

Dryads.

Leander dropped back on all fours to duck the swinging arms as he bellowed, *"Run!"*

For a second, it felt like I was back in the fairy path in Rosemead, when he'd come to save me from the redcaps. But this time, I would run, and trust he'd follow. I also had to preserve the rose, what they seemed to be after, at all costs.

I stuffed the jar back in my bag and jumped up, using their striking limbs as the rungs of a twisted ladder. I sped up my precarious escape, my feet always finding a spot to land and run over, unable to waste a thought worrying about how I was faring. All I could do was continue ahead, keeping the rose safe.

Below, I could hear Leander's comforting roars, as he splintered his way through them with unrepentant force. I kept going until I saw a light at the end of the tunnel of silent, wooden enemies. The end of the passage, framing a view of a moss-covered castle!

A burst of hope poured renewed strength in my legs as I pushed myself further, zig-zagging my leaps over the dryads. "We're almost at the end—Leo!"

A startled shriek tore through my throat as something gripped my ankle mid-sprint and swatted me with an agonizing crash to the ground.

Hard, piercing hands ripped at my bag, at my clothes and hair, and all I could see were their morphing bodies coalescing around me, as if they'd

entomb me. But no amount of claustrophobic terror would let them take this rose from me!

Screaming in pain and rage, I fought for my bag. The moment I tore the iron poker out, they exploded simultaneously in nerve-scraping screeches. I swung my weapon rabidly, shrieking almost as loud as they did. *"Get back!"*

I'd singed some and set one's lilac hair on fire when Leander burst through the group of dryads trying to swarm me into dropping the poker. He swung the one on fire like a flaming torch at the rest, forcing them off me.

"Run!"

Assured of his safety, I scrambled up and threw myself ahead. When he overtook me, gesturing wildly at me, I jumped on his back, gripping his coat with one hand and swinging the iron bar at whatever came at us.

We finally burst out of the wood with the dryads in pursuit, onto a white-stone road bordered by primroses. But it didn't lead to the castle gates, just to a solid wall surrounding it, at least fifty feet high. I could have sworn I hadn't seen it when I'd glimpsed the castle.

I swung with all my might, breaking splintered fingers off my bag, panting, "This seems to be the back of the castle—we need to make it all the way around!"

"Let's hope we don't find a battlement of poplar nymphs guarding the gates!" he growled as he hurtled on all fours, with me barely hanging on.

Between beating back any dryad that gained on us, I got glimpses of our surroundings as we tore through a short clearing leading to a stretch of trees that reminded me too much of home.

But nothing disturbed me with its familiarity more than the statue of the Horned God.

Made of corroding bronze rather than iron, this depiction had a white stag's skull, a skeletal body and a purple cloak. Just like the one painted on Rosemead Castle's dining room window. And the one from my dream back in Autumn.

Then I felt as if I'd fallen back into the nightmare.

It moved.

With long legs, clawed hands and a bare ribcage, the Horned God stalked after us, making the swarm of persistent dryads scatter before freezing back into trees.

“Where did they go?” Leander panted beneath me.

Unable to take my eyes off the nightmare-come-to-life shadowing us, I let out a shaky rasp, “They took a hint—the iron, it—it—it, uh…”

“It what?” He began to turn but I gripped his head, forcing his eyes back ahead. “Bonnie, what made them leave?”

“Nothing important.”

“The only thing that could make things like that fall back is if they were called off or if they w-were…” He looked behind and stiffened beneath me. “…scared off by something far worse.”

I drummed on his back, urging him to keep going. “Don’t look at it! Just run!”

“*Run?* I can’t outrun Death!”

I had to agree he could be right. Especially now Death was literally chasing us.

But even as I felt my same horror cleave into him, Leander zoomed away, his speed now dizzying, blurring our surroundings. I clung to him with every ounce of strength as he put more distance between us and the nightmare in pursuit.

“It’s not him, can’t be him—it’s just a statue, all right?” I choked into his ear. “We had one like that near my house.”

“Did yours move?” he yelled as he took a sharp turn, hurling us off course and into a hedge path.

I tore my eyes from the thing that appeared closer behind us, without seeming to speed up, and wheezed, “It’s not our time. We’re not dying before I get a chance to give that woman a piece of my mind, you hear me?”

Not that The Horned God cared what I intended. It gained on us, trampling on fallen petals that crunched beneath its feet like that rose I’d crushed back in Rosemead. My agitation soared to new heights at the memory, and at its inexorable approach. We needed to lose it!

As if hearing my panic, with one last soaring leap, Leander catapulted us out of the path and into an arching doorway in the castle wall, too small for that thing to get through.

We emerged between walls of leaves, the hedge path outside continuing inside. The doorway melted away, being replaced by solid wall in seconds.

When moments passed and it didn’t appear again behind us, I released a shuddering breath from my clenched chest, and climbed off Leander. Now I understood why everyone in my town was so scared of that sculpture. In motion, it truly was a hair-whitening sight.

Trying to get my racing heart under control, I looked around. The hedges stretched up high, creating a path leading to a sharp corner ahead.

“What is this place?”

Leander tried to rise, only to groan and bend forwards again. “It looks like the hedgerow landscaping in the Royal Gardens in Arbore.”

I turned around, trying to think only good thoughts. We’d just escaped the Horned God, after all. I hoped we did. “Maybe it’s a passage leading guests in?”

Meeting my eyes with my same forced levity, Leander said, “It could be. The captain did say we’re free to walk in if we reach the castle. And maybe the castle itself sealed Death out as our reward for reaching it.”

That sounded plausible. I hoped, again.

I nodded, dusting and rearranging my disheveled clothes and hair. “This is it, then. We just walk through this and we face her.”

He forced himself to his feet as he took off the scarf. I bit my tongue, almost drawing blood. His face was far more animalistic than it had been on the boat. Almost fully bestial now.

Though in clear pain, he still offered me his hand gallantly. “Ready?”

Swallowing my rising anxiety, I shoved aside thoughts of the fallen petals, and placed my hand in his. “Ready.”

His hard, rough hand, practically a giant paw now, gripped my own and led me around the leafy corner of the hedge and into another set of hedges, then another, until we finally found an entryway between two hedges.

Going through, we found another hedge in our faces, and two openings on either side.

“Which way do we go?”

“Doesn’t matter. The paths in such showy garden pieces all lead to the same place. We just have to keep going in one direction.”

He pulled me after him to the left, past another corner and around an extruding curve in the hedge sculpture, facing a matching dip, leading to another opening.

As we entered our third hallway, we found ourselves caught between two more openings at the ends. We took another left, only to enter a blind

end.

We turned back and took another left, or was that a right, according to our previous position? It didn't matter, since we ended up in another passage with two openings.

My confusion gave way to the unease I'd been trying to suppress. "How do we keep going in one direction in a place like that?"

"I'm trying, but the layout is like nothing I've seen before."

We took the right this time, and only ended in another dead end.

"Leo?"

He growled in frustration. "This is ridiculous. Let's go back out. Hopefully Death went to look for someone else to hunt down. We have to walk around whatever this is."

But as we retraced our steps, I found that nothing looked familiar, that it was impossible to remember where we had come from.

The sense of being lost finally gripped me, tearing away any wishful thinking, and I admitted what was happening.

"Leander, this isn't a passage or a reward—it's a trap," I said, choking up. "We're trapped in a maze."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Years ago, in a life that belonged to another girl, in another world, I was rummaging through our local monastery's library, when I found a faded book with an eroded cover.

Inside was an account of a people that left their continent's mainland to settle the islands of the Deep Red Sea. In hindsight, I knew them to be Oresteians. The people I'd once thought fictional, created a flourishing civilization famed for their feats of architecture. Some inventors and engineers grew so famous, foreign kings paid any price to have them shipped over, to build them unprecedented contraptions and monuments. The story that came to mind now was called *Isle of the Mazemakers,* of a particular island that became memorable for the architects who built inescapable mazes for kings to trap enemies in, while they unleashed monsters on them.

Now I was in a maze, trapped by a fairy queen—and the monster to be unleashed on me was Leander.

I hated to think it, but he'd once told me that the curse would end with him becoming a true animal. At his rate of devolution, if we remained here, he would cease to be a man, in body and in mind. All that would remain of him would be a cornered beast.

That meant that if I didn't find a way out of here fast, and get a hold of that fairy queen, I would meet my end between his jaws.

We had crossed realms, survived magical trials and vanquished monsters, only to be defeated by a bunch of hedges.

No! This was not how our story ended! I refused to let that happen!

I turned around to Leander, to tell him that we'd find a way out—but he wasn't there.

We'd been separated somehow!

Then I heard his frantic call. Hearing it coming from imprecise directions brought back chilling memories of the knuckelavee.

"Leander!" I screamed across the hedges, frenzied voice echoing out through the dead silence. "Stay where you are. I'll find you."

"Or you could just give up." A dreamy voice flowed through the wall of leaves around me like a breeze.

That voice. I knew that voice. Why did I know that voice?

"It's her." Leander's voice came from somewhere close by. "She spoke to me the night the rose tree appeared on the castle grounds."

"Where are you?" I called out. "Why did you trap us?"

"You are right where I want you," said the Spring Queen.

"Your Majesty, we're not trespassing. We came here to seek an audience with you," said Leander, tight, pained. "I am the son of King Florent of Arbore—"

"I know exactly who you are, Prince Leander. And I must say I never expected you to leave your castle. You're wasting time you don't have gallivanting about my realm. What could have possibly made you come all the way here?"

"Me." I looked above, hoping to see her floating above us. "We came to discuss the terms of his curse. And since you're already here, we can talk about this."

She let out a girlish giggle, amused. *"I see the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."*

"What are you talking about?"

A rush of wind rustled the leaves behind me and blew my hair back. *"Belaina Fiællan's daughter is just as harebrained as she was, with no regard for who suffers the consequences of your schemes. And look, you even roped a prince into it too."*

Fed-up anger fanned the flames of frustration, burning my eyes and throat. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I?" The wind grew stronger, making the leaves rustle like a grating tune accompanying her taunting. *"Your whims got your friend captured by a witch, and you sent to Rosemead. Then you got yourself*

locked up with a beast only to cut down his life span by destroying half the tree I gave him. And you didn't even bother trying to make up for it."

"That's what I'm here for!" I balled my fists, desperate to deny her accusations, to make her show herself. "It's neither of our faults you made the curse unfair."

"And how did you come to that conclusion?"

My whole body burned with outrage. "You said an act of love would spare him, and all those caught in the curse with him. But it didn't. I'm starting to think you never planned on this curse ending. You're just a sadist who wanted to make two children suffer for their parents' trivial slight!"

This wasn't what I had come here to do. I was supposed to be calm, collected, and charming, what Leander might not manage to be in his tortured state. But I couldn't help myself. She needed to hear all this.

"Pretty words and empty gestures aren't an act of love, Bonnibel. I learned that from his father." The wind stopped and while her tone remained airy, uninterested, it wasn't entertained anymore. *"If you want to face me and make your case, and prove yourself to my curse, then do it."*

"What do you mean from my father?" Leander shouted. "Whatever it was he did, whatever my mother said to you, Fairuza and I don't deserve your fury. The least we deserve is an answer to why you did this to us."

The Spring Queen didn't answer. She had said all she would, for now. She'd challenged us to find her. And for that, we needed to get out.

But as Leander angrily demanded that she answer him, I was forming my own theories.

My mother had run off with my father to the human world to avoid something, someone.

Could it have been her?

If that were the case, that would make her the source of both of our lives' problems.

Whatever the answer was, I was done being forced to play a fairy's cruel game.

I felt up the hedges, pulling on some to see if they would spawn angry dryads or worse. "Leander, we need to think about getting out in a different way."

"And that is?"

"We cheat."

A minute of silence passed. “How does one cheat at escaping a maze?”

“We need to see where we’re going. From above.”

“Did you suddenly sprout pixie wings that I’m unaware of?”

My heart trembled at his attempt at humor. It told me he was still my Leander. So far. But I had to work fast, in case his unpredictable deterioration accelerated.

I tried to jump as high as Keenan had, but I barely got a quarter of the way up the towering hedge. I had to climb up the rest of the way.

“I’ll see you at the top,” I called out, and started to pull myself up.

But though they looked like solid walls, the hedges were anything but. My feet constantly sank through, getting stuck. Grabbing a hold on the leaves and twigs had me slipping repeatedly, almost shredding my every exposed inch.

When I finally reached the top of the hedge, I was trembling all over and panting. Standing on the precarious surface wasn’t any easier than getting there, but I finally looked down at our green prison.

It seemed to have no rhyme or reason. A giant puzzle designed to make whoever attempted to solve it go mad or give up.

Even from this vantage point, I couldn’t see a way out. Not from the inside. The maze was an enormous rectangle with no exit, ending hundreds of feet from the castle grounds. But…

Something heavy hit the ground beneath me, finally alerting me to where Leander was.

He groaned as he sat up, twigs in his hair. “I’m too heavy and uncoordinated to make it to the top.”

This was bad. Very bad. The beast side of him was taking over. And that side couldn’t climb. And that queen knew it.

Teeth grinding under the strain, I said, “I’m going to direct you from here.”

He got back on all fours, back bowed, legs bending in an inhuman formation to accommodate the position. “So you see the way out?”

“Uhh …” I looked again, hoping I’d missed an opening. I hadn’t. “There isn’t one exactly.”

“Then how do we get out?”

I could get out. All I had to do was reach the end of the hedge and climb down. It would be difficult to navigate on this surface, but it was doable. As for him…

I swallowed. “I was thinking we make it to the very end and figure it out from there.”

He didn’t seem convinced this was all there was to it, but still said, “Lead the way.”

I took one more minute to chart a path to the end of the maze. To avoid the dead ends for him on the ground, it would be the most complicated path for me up here. But I only cared about getting him as close as possible to the way out. Once there…

We *would* figure it out.

I carefully started moving along the hedge, mostly on my hands and knees. Leander walked by me at the bottom, constantly sneaking glances up. Probably preparing to catch me if I fell off.

In a much longer time than my worst estimates, we reached the maze’s edge.

“We’re there, aren’t we?” he said.

I looked down at him. “Yes. All we need is get you over the hedge, then it’s all over.”

“All over,” he rumbled, before shaking his head. “I’m having a hard time remembering how to walk on two legs on the ground. You go. I’ll wait for you here.”

I almost pitched over the side as I surged to meet his gaze over the edge. “Listen to me, Leander. Whatever you’re feeling now, it will only get worse. I know it’s hard, but we’re almost there. We’ve come so far. Just push a little further.”

He looked up at me, melancholy dimming his brilliant eyes. “I don’t need to get out of here, Bonnie. *You* need to make my case to the Queen, as we agreed from the start. She will either lift the curse, and I’ll climb out, or she won’t, and here would be just another place to die.”

“You won’t die! You’re not giving up on yourself, again! And I’m not doing this alone. We’re doing this together, remember?”

“I can’t, Bonnie.”

I gazed down at him, feeling my heart would burst with frustration and dread.

Then I started climbing down. To him.

“No!” he roared. “What are you doing? Get back!”

But I didn’t heed his demands, kept climbing down at the cost of endless lacerations, before I jumped down the rest of the way beside him.

He looked beside himself with frustration.

“Get back up there, Bonnie. Go to the queen.”

“I’m not going anywhere, not without you. You must try to climb, because if you don’t, and we remain here, we’ll either die of hunger or you’ll end up turning into a complete beast and kill me.” He stumbled back with a look of absolute horror. I pressed my advantage. This had always been the way to make him act, not for himself, but for those he felt responsible for, those he cared about. “So if you want to save me, you have to climb that hedge.”

He stared at me for a moment more, then finally grumbled, “Dog with a bone!”

“And you’d better not forget it.”

“No danger of that whatsoever.” He rolled his eyes at me, ripping another laugh from me, then he started trying to climb.

At more than one point, it seemed impossible he’d reach the top. I started suspecting there was magic involved to thwart his efforts. He crashed to the ground so many times, I stopped counting. I tried to drag him up, only to join him on the ground in a tattered, bruised heap, over and over.

At one point, I had to give up, at least for now. We had to rest, and try again later.

I said so, and this seemed to scare him. He said he could feel his mind slipping away faster, and couldn’t afford to wait until it was totally gone. Then with a final burst of determination, he did it!

Falling off the other side was far easier, if not any less painful.

Then we were both finally standing, bent over and torn up, staring at the heart of Spring.

This was it. This was what we came here for. It could all end here and now.

And there she was, the one we’d crossed realms to find. The Spring Queen.

In the shade of the sprawling, vine-covered castle’s ground-floor terrace, she sat on a throne covered in curling briar, in a flowing, sleeveless gown, fanning herself with a giant flower.

Between us was a grand, circular garden, bigger than a common field, with flowers in every color of the rainbow, divided by pristine stone

walkways. Right in the middle, bobbing in the breeze, was a stretch of blue, bell-shaped flowers that seemed to drink in the daylight.

Bonnibels.

My mind swirled with questions, with the significance of finding my namesake here, until we were within feet of her.

The fan blocked most of her face, the only visible part her forehead, and the thick, red hair she had up in a layered updo, held together with three golden circlets.

"It's not good manners to cheat at a game," she said coyly, voice still gratingly familiar, but I was in no condition to place the similarity. "You were supposed to take your time navigating my maze, not circumventing it."

"You know there was no way out from the inside," I said through gritted teeth. "You also said if we could face you, we could make our case. Are you going to honor that claim, or waste even more time you know we don't have?"

Leander touched my hand. "Bonnie, this isn't what you came here to do."

"And what is it you both came here to do?" asked the Spring Queen, obnoxiously amused.

Though it looked like it pained him, on every level, Leander bowed to her, beastly mouth clenched in a grimace. "Your Majesty, we come to negotiate the terms of my curse."

"The terms were simple, Prince Leander." She lowered her fan, showing us her eyes, a bright green that emanated a soft glow. "Find someone who will prove their love for you as you are now. There are no dishonorable tricks regarding your condition. Unlike your father, and her mother, I keep my promises, so it is no fault of mine that you seem to have failed."

Fury and frustration collided headfirst within me, a pair of rams locking horns and struggling to take hold of my tongue. I wanted to toss my iron bar at her for mocking the state she had put him in, and grab her by the hair as she burned, demanding answers. For everything. From her mentions of our parents, to why she seemed so familiar.

The voice that matched hers flowed through my mind again, like the whispering wind on an autumn night, as I looked beside me at the plot of bonnibels…

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” she hummed, pleased. “Such a rare shade in flowers, even here. But I must say you favor them, they’re blue—”

“Like my eyes,” I finished for her.

Every piece of the puzzle crashed in place.

I went up to her in a daze—and tore the massive purple flower from her hand.

Smiling up at me, calm and strange as ever, was the owner of my local tavern.

I had spent many an afternoon there, reading in booths and sipping on ciders, waiting for Adelaide to finish her shifts. Every day we walked home with this woman waving us off, and some days my father had come to join us, only to get a few words in with her. A few words were all anyone could get from her in the busy Poison Apple tavern. And whatever she said always came off as odd. To everyone, that had seemed normal, coming from the distracted mind of the seemingly foreign woman no one truly knew, but couldn’t remember ever not knowing.

My boundless bafflement came out as monotone shock. “Miss Etheline?”

“Nice to see you again, Bonnibel,” she said. “I would have hoped it had been under nicer circumstances.”

“You…” I just stared at her, searching her face, hoping it was another deceptive creature, wearing the face and voice of someone I knew to lure me into a trap. But I just knew it wasn’t. This was her.

Etheline looked exactly the same as I had last seen her. The only difference was her pointed ears. She hadn’t even changed the pearlescent luster to her skin, the one we both now shared. How had I not connected that similarity the instant I saw it in myself?

“You know her?”

Leander’s hand on my arm, jolted me out of my stupor, brought back the prior anger, full force. Being nice and diplomatic with her was the last thing on my mind.

“I clearly don’t,” I snarled as I glared at her. “Who are you? And what were you doing in my town? Were you what was chasing my mother?”

“I *am* the Spring Queen, Bonnibel. And ‘chasing’ implies I’m in the wrong.”

That was a confirmation if I ever heard one. And I only knew I was poised to attack her when Leander caught me around the middle.

“And you aren’t?” I struggled against his restraint, hands clawing the air, wishing it was her face. “You cursed two children for no reason!”

“No reason!” Her soft cackles of disbelief ripped an affronted growl from Leander. “My, I have to wonder what version of the story you got. Surely not one as unrecognizable as the story that turned a mad, opportunistic, fleeing criminal like Alberic into a saint.”

“Then what was your reason?” Leander barked, gripping me tighter against him, shaking from the effort of partially straightening. “I know a part of the story is missing, but what could rationalize what you did to me and Fairuza?”

Etheline propped her chin in her palm, watching us with twinkling eyes. “And what did Florent tell you? That I was a stranger who came out of the blue, handing out curses like a dark counterpart to Father Frost?”

“They said you felt slighted for not being invited to celebrate the birth of the first Arborean princess in generations, that they invited lesser fairies to bless her, and when you arrived unannounced, my mother insulted you.”

“That she did, but her fat mouth was only the feather that broke the gryphon’s back.” Suddenly, I could see cracks in her funny facade, and my own burgeoning hurt and hatred reflected in her ethereal eyes. “Florent never told you about me, never even mentioned my name?”

“I wasn’t aware you had one,” Leander said honestly. “I don’t think he did, either.”

Etheline scoffed at him, dry and bitter. “He knew my name. He knew all there was to know about me.”

Leander and I shared confused looks before his eyes returned to the queen. “How could he have known you? I’ve never heard of Arbore having personal ties to Faerie. We were never even allies.”

“That’s because we were meant to have the first, to be the second,” she said. “Your father and I met when he was still a prince governing Rosemead, and I was visiting the human territories bordering my Court.” Her tone softened, the hurt magnifying in her eyes. “He was hunting in the woods while I made my way through Nexia. We met halfway on the fairy path—and it was love at first sight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Leander dropped me on my feet as he stumbled back on all fours.

"Love?" I snapped, getting over my shock faster than him, questioning her capability of such a feeling.

"One worth a legendary tale from your bards and poets," she said wistfully. "He hosted me in his castle, and took me on a tour of his lands, and to meet his mother. I wanted to take him back here with me, show him how similar our kingdoms were, but he said he couldn't leave his old, frail father. But once it seemed he would be king sooner than we'd hoped, we discussed marriage. I was ready to leave my world behind for his, to join our realms with our children. It wouldn't have been much of an absence for me, considering the passage of time, and I would have made our second-born my heir here, while our first would be King of Arbore someday."

Leander shut his mouth slowly, then he seemed to remember how to move it. "You *agreed* on all of this?"

"We were *betrothed*. I paid my dowry in rich soil and cultivars of flowers that boosted your kingdom's produce. We were set to marry in the spring." Her eyes landed on Leander, full of resentment. "The day of our wedding came, and all the arrangements and ceremony went through—but for a different bride. One deemed a more advantageous match than I."

I joined Leander in gaping at her.

"That…but…how?" Leander's rumbling sounded less and less human by the second. "There had been talks to connect both ends of the Folkshore long before I was born. Surely he must have known he would marry my mother or my aunt at some point."

“It seems he did, but never told me. The explanation he gave me at your sister’s naming ceremony was that he had mistakenly assumed that your maternal grandfather would be fine with either of his princesses marrying the spare, your moron uncle Jonquil,” she sneered. “Then he offered *him* to me as compensation, could you imagine?”

From what Leander had told me of his uncle, now regent in his place thanks to the curse, I, too, would have been offended by the prospect.

“He made all these plans with you, only to drop you for Zomoroda?” I probed, suspecting she was at least exaggerating. “Just like that? No warning? No apologizes?”

“Don’t look so surprised, dear,” she snapped, making me flinch as if she’d chucked something at me. “Your mother did the same thing to poor Yulian.”

The way the King of Winter had looked at me, even with his almost non-existent scope of emotion, still pained me. I had considered that he might have loved my mother, but not that there had been an actual relationship between them.

But I had to ask about something else now. “Why were you chasing my mother?”

“It wasn’t just me.” Etheline tutted with a chiding shake of her head. “I was just the one who found her. The silly girl thought she could throw us all off your scent by naming you Bonnibel, so even after she was long gone anyone who happened upon you would write you off as a changeling.”

My heart kicked my ribs so hard, I almost dropped to my knees beside Leander. “Sh-She knew she was d-dying before she gave birth to me?”

“Yes, she did. But I suppose a few years of playing peasant with your father was worth dooming herself and Yulian.” Etheline moved, whip-quick, to point an accusatory finger at us. “Like his father, your mother was betrothed to a fairy monarch, and broke off the engagement to take a human instead, without the decency of telling the other person involved.”

“And you cursed her?” I found myself screaming, the top of my head ready to blow off.

“Belaina cursed herself by breaking her betrothal bond,” Etheline snapped. “Our bonds aren’t like yours, with your promises just words with as much weight as wind.”

“Our promises have weight!”

At my seething chagrin, she flung a delicate hand dismissively. “Continue believing that if you wish, it doesn’t change the fact that what you say is hardly what you mean. His father claimed to love me, to want to be with me, to create a dynasty through our offspring, to blend our populations and bring Arbore into a Golden Age of Magic—a western version of Opona!” She laughed, a sad, longing sound trailing into a worn-out rasp. “I offered to bind us, and he promised that he was mine without a bond—and I believed him.”

“If a bond is nothing like a spoken promise, then what is the difference between one and the contract drawn between both my grandfathers to marry my parents?” Leander asked her, sounding at a complete loss.

“A bond is a true binding of body, mind and soul—and if you don’t honor it, you, as well as your betrothed, are punished for it.” Etheline locked eyes with me, anger not quite directed at me, but unavoidable all the same. “That is what killed your mother. Belaina withered like an autumn leaf while Yulian is turning to ice.”

After over a decade of questions and theories—of being cut off from most people, and the family I never knew I had, deprived of my true form and legacy, of the truth about my parents, especially my mother and what killed her—I felt like I would have accepted any answer. Just as long as it was, in fact, an answer, not a half truth to placate me, like what my father had been giving me…

“My father!” I blurted out. “Robin saw a fairy taking him, then I found him back in our house. That was you!”

“It was me, yes. I spelled him and transported him back to Aubenaire. I couldn’t have him interrupting whatever progress you two were making in your relationship.”

That was what it took to snap Leander from his stunned daze. “You *planned* all this?”

“I wish I had, but my foresight is not that strong. Whatever plans I had for you, Bonnibel, they did not include Leander. But the Fates work in mysterious ways.”

I struggled to regain my calm, asked another burning question. “If you knew who I was, and my mother masquerading me as a stunted changeling was pointless, why haven’t you done anything about it sooner? What were these plans that included setting up a tavern in town?”

“In order to fix the problem your mother created, I had to wait for you to grow up,” she said, matter-of-factly. “Belaina knew that if we found her, we couldn’t do much about her marriage and motherhood. But she knew that we would take you as compensation.”

“Compensation?”

“To make you take her place as Yulian’s wife.”

I recoiled, even as I felt Leander stiffen with a growl beside me.

The worst part of all this was how much sense it was starting to make, how everything had been connected, that nothing had been a coincidence.

“I also came to see what kind of man could make a fairy princess run off to a dull town at the end of the world, deprive herself of magic and a long life, just to be his wife.” An almost fond look crossed her ethereal face before she let out a tired sigh. “Unfortunately, your father was not the problem. Your mother was no naive maiden seduced by a foreign man. She knew what she was doing, and she didn’t care. All she wanted was to do as she wished, and that was to spite her mother, and to thwart all plans made for her to be Queen of Winter.”

That aligned with my father’s story, of how my mother would come and go from Autumn until one day she hassled him out of the realm, claiming to be in danger. “Was my grandmother from Winter?”

She snorted incredulously at me. “Where do you think you got your blue eyes from?”

I didn’t think. I could no longer think. I had enough of thinking for the rest of my life.

In my aghast silence, Leander regained his tenacity, growling, “I still don’t see how ruining our lives because my father broke off your engagement is any better than doing it for a slight.”

“In *your* world, breaking a contract between two leaders is grounds for far worse. For wars that ruin tens of thousands of lives and destroy countries for generations.” Etheline’s eyes flashed, becoming a less pleasant shade of green. “I could have easily brought my forces to your kingdom, demanding he divorce your mother and make good on his promise or face my wrath. But I chose to give your family a second chance.” She made a mocking gesture at us. “As you both keep saying, I chose to ‘negotiate’ an amendment to our deal.”

Leander reached for me as he tried to rise. I rushed to kneel beside him instead. He squeezed me to his side, holding on tight, bracing for the truth

of the event that had ruled and ruined his life. I clung to as much of him as I could.

"When your sister was born, the first princess in generations, he invited all notable figures in both our worlds to her naming celebration—everyone but me. But he wanted godmother gifts from every Court, for his briar bush of a family tree's first blooming rose, and that made him invite one from my own." She sat back, fiddling with the thorny briars curling over her head. "It was another insult to injury, but I decided this was the best time to give him the chance to fix his transgression, and pay me what I was owed."

"Was your plan the same as the one you had for Bonnie?" Leander rasped.

"Yes. Our broken relationship aside, as a royal, I'd made a deal to unite our realms, and it was still binding. His choosing to ally with another human nation hadn't voided it. So, I told him that to avoid inciting my wrath, we could rebrand the deal, and he would have *both* of his children marry fairy royalty." She clapped softly, her gemstone rings colliding in a *clink*. "Fairuza would have been sent to marry my nephew Guidion, with both becoming my heirs here in Spring. While you would marry me, introducing fairy blood into the Silverthorn bloodline, uniting our realms as your father and I had agreed on."

"And my mother refused," he finished for her.

She tutted, examining her rings. "In the most offensive way possible, which, in my world, is also grounds for war. Your father tried to appeal to me, insulting me further by offering me Jonquil instead. Then your mother said no fairy, starting with me, would ever come near her children, and threatened to have her guards kill me with their iron weapons."

Considering Arbore's current war over magic with the nearby kingdom of Avongart, it really was a wonder how all-out war hadn't started with the Spring Court too. A never-ending war with Faerie, where they had all the time in the world compared to humans, would have worn down Arbore and whatever allied lands came to their aid. It could have been a disaster, for Arbore, and the whole human world.

Instead, she'd made plans for a series of unions, to right the wrongs of others, to honor the deals that were made. Have me marry the King of Winter, have Fairuza becoming Queen of Spring, and Leander making her Queen of Arbore. The same goal, but with different players.

“That was when I made the decision that if us fairies couldn’t have you, no one could.” Etheline drew arcs in the air with her finger, encasing our feet in a circle of glittering smoke, a sample of her magic. “No king would pin their daughter on you, like they did on your father, and Florent wouldn’t pursue that option, as no arranged marriage would resolve your curse. And Zomoroda wouldn’t get to see her coveted daughter become queen of another land.”

“But that’s still not fair!” I hiccuped, trying not to cry over her story, over the truth about my mother and his father. “Why couldn’t you just enforce these arrangements, tell them that it was at the risk of war, tell them what you just told us?”

“I did. They still refused,” Etheline said. “They knew this betrayal could only be resolved by a treaty through marriage or war. But they also knew I wouldn’t sacrifice countless lives for their human arrogance. It was why they were so brazen in their refusal. So I chose the curse as the third option.”

“Queen Etheline, I understand your motives, but you have to admit my sister and I are blameless.” Leander’s legs shook as he forced himself to his feet, growing too heavy above me as I tried to support him. “Bonnie is right, you could have enforced those demands, especially once Fairuza and I were old enough to make our own decisions. You could have come to us!”

“You still can!” I cried out, desperately grasping at this solution. “Fairuza was probably rejected by the Prince of Cahraman, so you can bring her here, train her to be your heir’s partner. And Leander can take you back to Arbore with him!”

Leander heaved himself off me, stumbling back into a deep hunch, looking at me as if I was crazy. “Bonnie—what are you doing?”

“Negotiating!”

“This isn’t what we agreed on, or what I want!”

“Haven’t you been listening? What you want doesn’t matter—it never did!”

“No! We came here to get the curse lifted, then return to Arbore engaged!”

“I know, but—” I tore my gaze away from his imploring one, wrung my hands at Etheline. “Don’t you still want to be Queen of Arbore?”

“No,” she said firmly. “That ship was given many chances, and it has long-since sailed.”

Leander dropped back to his hands, crowded me away from Etheline’s throne as he closed in on her, regaining her attention. “Why stipulate ways to break the curses, then? Why do that, only to make them impossible to break?”

“I had no part in you taking after your parents.” She stood, regal and imposing, no longer the scatterbrained tavern owner I’d known most of my life. “Your behavior, in particular, affected the extent of your curse’s hold over you.” She looked him dead in the eye. “But I wanted you to prove me wrong.”

I pushed against him, trying to regain her focus. “We’re here to do that!”

She inclined her head at me. “Oh?”

Hope and anxiety beat in my chest, drumming all the way up to my ears. This was the moment we’d all struggled and almost died for.

“We came here…” My voice shook. I pressed down hard on my agitation, tried again. “We came so I can vouch for his character. Since an act of love didn’t break the curse, there had to be something wrong. So I thought if you saw for yourself how he was, that he was worth my love regardless of how he appeared, that he—he—”

I could find no more words. Of all times to lose my wits and my ability to endlessly talk! When our very lives depended on it!

Etheline watched me with skeptical eyes. “Tell me, Bonnibel, what was this act of love that proved my curse to be faulty?”

“A hunter, who mistakenly thought Leander killed his father, was about to kill him—and I-I came between them,” I said through chattering teeth. “I risked my own life to talk the crazed hunter down. I ended up convincing him of the great wrong he was about to commit, and saved Leander, and by extension, everyone else caught in his curse. I’ve since risked my life over and over to get to you, to break his curse!”

“Is that it?”

“Is that it?” My outburst must have carried across all of Faerie. “What more could you want to prove my love for him?”

“The part where it’s *specifically* for him.” Etheline descended the steps of her throne, coming towards me.

Had I finally gone mad? Was I truly hearing this? “I don’t understand, how was that not for him? I saved *him*! I did all that for *him*!”

“And all of those were acts of selflessness, of nobility, not love,” she said with cold finality. “A testament to your goodness, not your feelings for this man. You would have done that for anyone in the same position. Love had nothing to do with it, and that is why the curse remains intact.”

“What else could I do, then? If coming all this way and braving all these dangers, if my feelings for him now and exchanging declarations and accepting his proposal isn’t love—*then what is?*”

Etheline stared at me with so much disappointment, which she had no right to aim my way.

“Your Majesty, whatever it is you want from us, we can’t do it.” Leander tried to rise on his knees, looking up at her beseechingly, as if praying before a goddess.

That must have been how Amadeus had prayed before his cruel mother Aglaea, to spare his wife Gratia from her torture. If I were Gratia in this case, I would have proven myself up to the task of freeing him, even if she ended up killing me for it. But I couldn’t even do that.

Leander continued, his ragged supplication cleaving deeper into my chest. “But you’ve seen how both of us are, how much she means to me, how different a person I am now. Doesn’t that have any worth?”

“It does.” Etheline motioned for him to rise, and he did, with great difficulty. I lurched to wrap my arms around him, struggling to help him stand. “I am pleased that you are more honorable than your father, and that she is more empathetic to the fates of others than her mother ever was. I had hoped you would prove me wrong, be better than your parents, and you have—somewhat. You could still do more, though.”

“Yes, we can.” I latched onto the first inch she gave, desperate to spin it into a lifeline. “Lift the curse, and we’ll have our whole lives to prove you wrong. In all manner of ways! We’ll establish relations with Faerie, we’ll do whatever you wish, just please give us the time—the chance!” She started to shake her head, and my voice rose to a frantic yell. “I made a promise! To him, to my friends, to his people back at the castle—that I would help break this curse, and spare their lives. You said my mother broke a promise that cursed a king, and that his father broke your heart, but by breaking the curse, you let me fulfill that promise to him, and not break my heart.”

Etheline raised her brows, looking impressed. “You make a great case, I have to admit.”

Leander groped for my hand, unable to link our fingers, just a comforting grip as we stood before her, united in our love, our cause. I could feel him shake as fiercely as I did.

“So, you’ll do it then?” I panted. “You’ll break the curse?”

Etheline took in my manic appeal, and his miserable state, and descended the final step.

When I felt I would burst with expectation, she set a hand on each of us, and smilingly said, “No.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A loud crack tore through the air as Leander collapsed with an agonized howl.

The horrifying noise of his bones rearranging crashed into my own marrow, echoing out of my mouth in a shrill scream. *"No!"*

Etheline's smile became more forced than ever.

"Why?" he rasped from his prostration. "Why won't you take a chance on us?"

"It's out of my hands now." Etheline gave us a pitying grimace. "There's a reason there are no accounts of anything like your attempt, Prince Leander. A curse is not an enchantment that can be lifted, it is a binding that must be broken."

For the first time, I felt time in this realm. Everything around me moved at a snail's pace, as if I was becoming encased in amber, like the flecks imprisoned in my ring. Rays of light appeared solid, faint sounds blared in my ear at maddening frequencies as I slowly turned to Leander, hoping he'd do something, even attack her. We had nothing more to lose at this point.

But even in his near-complete state as a giant wolf-like creature, he didn't give in to his bestial side, didn't threaten her with incensed growls and gnashing teeth. He just stared up at her, void of emotion, like she hadn't just thrown a rock through our window of opportunity, shattering our hopes into a million pieces.

He finally rasped, "So, there's nothing you can do? Not even give us another rose tree to extend my time?"

She sighed. “If you haven’t found the means to break the curse by now, then you won’t find them in another few months of exile in your castle. You had three years of doing that.”

“Bonnie only showed up a few weeks ago.”

“You still sat around and waited for a solution to fall into your lap.” She came to stand over him, shaking her head in regret. “You could have long since found another girl, charmed one of your servants in a similar state to you, like your friend the satyr had. There are many ways to go about such things, but you chose to give up early, then misinterpret the rules. It is not my fault few in your world understand what loving someone truly means.”

Feeling faint, I crashed beside Leander, clinging to him, at a complete loss.

He went on in that inhuman voice, “But it is your fault it’s come to this. My parents should have paid for their own crimes against you.”

“They have, with you, the heir I was spurned to create, then denied as compensation. It’s far too late for apologies or amendments, on my side or your parents’. I truly did hope you would prove me wrong. Now if I could only try to find a way to help King Yulian with his curse.”

Leander struggled to move through the pain of his final transformation, and I snapped out of my daze enough to help him up again. The hand in mine had lost the last of its humanity.

Etheline regarded our huddled misery, green eyes brimming with disappointment, not at us, but at the whole, hopeless situation. “Would you like to return to Autumn now?”

“I need to go home,” he said, struggling to form distinct words. “My staff deserve to know what happened, and if I’m to die like this, it has to be with them.”

With a nod, Etheline waved a hand in the air, drawing a circle of sparkling light that cut a hole into the space before us. Spinning light and wind quickly gave way to a familiar view: the fairy path in Rosemead.

He broke away from me, started prowling towards the portal.

It was only then time sped up again and my paralysis shattered. I pounced on him, trying to pull him back. “This can’t be it! We—we still have two months. We’ll figure something out before then!”

“*I* still have two months, you have the rest of your life—quite possibly forever in this realm, and as a fairy.” Tearing his arm from my frantic

hold, he stumbled towards the portal. “Please, Your Majesty, send Bonnie back to her family in Autumn.”

The moment Etheline raised her hand to rip open another portal, desperation catapulted me after him.

“You can’t give up like this! I made a—”

My shout split, part left behind in Verdure, the other finishing in Rosemead.

“—promise!”

The word blew through the woods, echoing between their trunks, waking all that slept among their leaves. The large, blue, glass-like mushrooms that bordered the fairy path I stumbled onto after Leander, all lit up one after the other, sensing our motion.

Seemingly unaware of my presence behind him, Leander prowled on all fours, rumbling in pain, heading out of the woods. I trailed after him in stymied silence.

But a few feet into the clearing outside the woods, he collapsed, twisting in agony on the grass, and groaning like a butchered animal.

Heart almost uprooting from my chest, I stared at him in helplessness as he dug his claws into the earth and his warping body released teeth-grinding cracks.

Why was he going through so much change, so fast? How could I stop it?

My hand shook beyond control as I bent to kiss his head, sobbing, “I’ll be right back.”

I burst to my feet, leaping and running as fast as I could, pushing through the pain and dread and exhaustion.

When I was finally limping up the hill towards the castle, window after window lit up, curtains drawing apart for excited, monstrous faces to peer down at me.

Then the gates crashed apart, and Ivy the housekeeper and Sir Philip the head guard burst out, led by Glenn, Jessamine’s younger brother.

“You’re back!” Glenn greeted me with a delighted grin, arms in the air. Behind him Ivy was even more snake-like, her skin scaly, her nose bridge fully flattened, her ears gone. Sir Philip’s human torso had almost disappeared into his horse half.

Ivy curled her tail around me and swept me into a hug. “I’m so happy you made it back safely!”

What was I supposed to tell them? To save their relief for another day, if that day came?

I could only collapse to my knees, gasping, “Leander is hurt!”

The moment I told them where he was, Philip tore away in a gallop. It felt like an eternity before he returned with his master on his back.

As the others rushed me inside, memories, most of them now fond, enveloped me with their aching nostalgia. Then I saw the mosaic of the rose on the ground before the main staircase and almost keeled over. It reflected the wilting flower in my jar, a distressing number of fallen petals beneath it. As if I needed the reminder.

Several staff members came through the hall and down the stairs if their bodies could manage it, filing after us towards Leander’s quarters, asking questions I could barely hear. Ivy made them all stand back as Philip set Leander on his bed and left.

Glenn’s babbling finally broke through my daze with his sister’s name.

“What?” I mumbled.

He watched me intently as he slowly repeated, “Jessie, where is she?”

I couldn’t thread my scattered thoughts into a sentence, only managed to say, “Married, honeymooning…” I could say no more with everyone’s desperate gazes burning me as if I’d come too close to the bonfire.

They were all depending on me and on their Master to spare them from this state they’d had no part or say in. I couldn’t imagine what they were feeling, emotionally or physically.

“The Master has had an arduous journey,” Ivy said, her forked tongue lashing out. “He will address us all in the morning. All of you, return to bed.”

The almost fully transformed staff retreated with reluctant mumbling. Ivy’s son, Oliver, lingered along with Glenn, who was still staring at me, waiting for clarification.

“Married to who? Honeymooning where?”

Depletion left me with no fortitude to explain. I just wanted to check on Leander.

The bed creaked loudly, and heavy feet hit the carpet, followed by an outraged bellow.

“Why did you follow me?”

I jerked around, found Leander snarling at me, on all fours.

“Did you think the third time would be the charm?” I said, my voice slurring. “That I would just let you leave me again?”

He bared his teeth at me in frustration, before he noticed Glenn, who was gaping at him in horror.

Leander struggled to rise halfway to his feet, to sound like himself as he addressed him, “Mister Quill, go get Robin, please. I have a few questions for him.”

Glenn awkwardly played with his fingers, a habit he shared with Jessamine. “Ah, Your Highness—the thing is—um—Robin isn’t here.”

“Where is he?” Leander growled. “Where is your brother? I thought I left you all guarding the castle.”

“Um, well, Dale, Robin, and Will all got called back to the front lines, and left me behind to keep an eye on things. But don’t worry, we just got great news! It will be even greater when you tell us how to break the curse.” He stopped, eyeing us worriedly. “You did wait to do it in the others’ presence, right? That’s why you’re still a beast?”

So, that was how they were all optimistically rationalizing it?

“What’s the good news, Mister Quill?” Leander asked.

Oliver leapt up, beating Glenn to the announcement. “The war with Avongart is over!”

That *was* good news. But after being sucker-punched with the worst news possible, after everything I’d discovered, I no longer took anything at face value. “It is?”

Ivy, clearly realizing the real situation, started pushing the boys out. “Messengers have been sent out to governors and lords, and the cryer just announced it to our city this morning.”

Glenn looked back from Ivy’s herding to yell, “All the men and your father should be home soon. But you don’t have to wait for them to end the curse, you can do it now!”

“Wait.” Leander followed them, losing his balance and landing hard on all fours before I could reach him. He shrugged my helping hands away and stopped the trio at the door. “When did Robin and Dale leave?”

Glenn shrugged. “Does it matter? The war is over!”

“Yes, it matters. It couldn’t have ended just three days after we left, so when did they leave?”

Glenn made an uncertain gesture. “A while ago. Don’t remember when exactly. But I want to know who my sister married and when we can

expect her back."

Ivy clamped her hand over Glenn's mouth, pressing him to her side as she slithered away, dragging Oliver behind her by his collar. "Time for bed, boys. We'll all talk in the morning."

Leander then burst into a lope, with me after him. "What is it? What's wrong now?"

Leander didn't answer me until we reached his study. "Wars don't just end. If we lost, they wouldn't be so happy. And if we won, they would have said so. Which means they had to have come to a stalemate, and had peace talks, maybe drawn up a treaty."

I shook my head as he threw open the balcony doors to look down at the garden. "I don't understand what the problem is."

For an answer, he slid over the balustrade. With a cry of shock, I vaulted over it, landing on my feet just as he hit the ground. I tried to get him up, but he only crawled further into the garden, towards the rose tree.

"Until we left, they'd been drafting more men back to the front line—the situation couldn't have changed that fast, and achieved that much in less than a month, which is how long the blue rose says we've been gone —" He trailed off, dropping onto his side to clutch at his chest, making my own heart seize.

I dropped to his side, panic overtaking all other senses, holding his hairy, wolfish face in my shaking hands, starting to sob again. "Leander? Leander, what is it? What's going on?"

Breathing shallow, too pained to move, he barely turned his head to look above us. "We weren't gone for a month—"

Hands shaking, I took the jar out of the bag, showing him the rose, down to its final layer of petals. "No, we weren't! We still have a few days left in this rose's month."

Leander took my clammy hand and pressed it over his heart. "These are the days left until we meet…our ends…"

"No, no—we still have two more—"

I looked up at the tree and all air and sanity escaped me.

The tree was empty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The jar slipped through my fingers, breaking on impact.

I stared at it as a chilly breeze swept over us. It had withstood so much, only to shatter from a simple fall.

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I pounced to pick the wilting rose. Leander's last chance.

Before I touched it, it floated as it had in the jar, and its petals were blown away by a cold gust, to join the rest that had fallen before the tree.

It was the last rose. And it was gone.

Gone.

"How could this happen?" I wept, suffocating with nausea and despair as I looked helplessly from the empty tree to the bare stalk. "What happened to the rest? We had two more roses left!"

"It seems the curse counted down with the ones left in the tree first, making the one we took with us the final month," Leander rasped, looking up at me with heavy, dimming eyes. It was only then I realized—we were in autumn. Three months had passed since we'd left. "I suspected it would come to this."

This had to be a nightmare. I must have been knocked out by the dryads, and was conjuring up a toxic mixture of all my fears. None of this was real.

But he felt too real. Lying incapacitated and horrendously transformed before me, among dried petals of dead roses, no fight in his eyes, the last human part of him ebbing.

"But this doesn't make sense." I sobbed harder, trying to drag his massive body onto my lap. "You couldn't have suspected this."

“But I did. I suspected we’d waste time in our trip, that curses aren’t undone, and that I’d return to die here.” His chest rose and fell with what felt like agonizing effort, the liveliest, most powerful voice I’d ever heard now an expiring rasp.

“Then why did we go?” I wailed. “Why did we do any of this?”

“I didn’t want to give up without trying. I owed it to you, to everyone. But you had your great adventure, found your family and heritage…we saw our friends get married—and we got answers for why our lives were the way they were. I won’t go feeling unaccomplished.”

Every fiber of me shaking, I lifted his hand to my face, leaning over him so I could hold his gaze, keep him awake. “You can’t go, we still have time.”

He rolled his head over my lap, a melancholy dismissal. “We have days, maybe hours of a slow descent into inhumanity—eventually becoming animals. How long we’ll live after that.” he groaned, “You should have never come back here. You should be back with your family, exploring the rest of their world. You’ve only scratched the surface…and haven’t asked enough questions.”

“I don’t want any more answers. I want to help you.”

He tried to stroke a stray lock off my face, but he no longer had a thumb. He abandoned his effort with a ragged exhalation. “You’ve done all you could. You put your life on the line for me, did more for me than anyone ever had, more than I dreamed possible…”

“Leander, I haven’t achieved anything!” I cried miserably, feeling my insides tearing apart. “*You* put your life on the line to entertain my ridiculous idea of breaking the curse, my desire to travel, to see Faerie and find my friend and look where it got us.”

“It got me back home to die with my people. As for you, now that the war is over, you can go back through Nexia, and pass easily through Summer as a fairy…and return to your family before their day ends. It will be like you never left.”

“I’m *not* leaving you.” I buried my face in his palm, tears rolling down my face and hitting his chest.

“Bonnie, there won’t be a promise to keep when I’m no longer myself—but only an ailing animal.”

“Then I’ll make you a new promise! I’ll stay, for however long the time you have left on this earth is, man or beast, I will be with you!”

“What if my condition now, is just the agonies of the final transformation? What if after I become fully a beast I live for years, decades?”

“Then I’ll stay for that long. I’ll take care of you and be by you until you draw your last breath!”

“No, no—you can’t. Your whole life—you’ve wanted nothing more than what you found in Faerie.” He raised a hand in urgency, and it only tangled in my hair. He closed his eyes in defeat, so close to giving in to the final tug of the curse. “Why would you trap yourself here with me again—for no reason but my own comfort—even when I stop being myself to appreciate it? Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Because I love you!” My heart squeezed itself dry as I rained tears and kisses over his face. “I love you and I want to be with you, under any circumstances, for as long as I can. I love you, Leander, no matter what you become—*I love you.* ”

His chest stilled, and the hand in my hair fell, limp by the wilted rose.

“Leander?” I rasped, shaking him by the shoulder. “Wake up. You still have time—you said it might be years or decades!” Then I was screaming, and screaming. “Wake up! Leander, wake up! Open your eyes—look at me, please—don’t go—don’t leave me—*please*.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

My hands shook over him, frantic for signs of life.

None registered from the totally transformed body before me.

A harsh crack lashed through me as the reality of what lay before me sank in. My whole world and body felt like they were collapsing from the inside out.

He was gone.

A wail tore out of me as I threw myself over him. I gripped onto his coat, feeling my ribs and spine falling apart and my tongue turning to ash in my mouth as I sobbed into his chest, eyes on fire, breath shards tearing my lungs.

This—this was helplessness. Despair. Heartbreak. Now I knew what they felt like.

This was how it ended for us, in a tragedy, with everything atrophying before it could bloom. We hadn’t had the chance to do all we wanted together, to even be together, and he was stolen from me like my father had stolen a rose from this tree.

This was how our story began and how it ended—with this cursed tree.

All I wanted now was for the Horned God to reappear, to strike the ground so it would open up and swallow it and us into the underworld, so I could see his soul one last time…

Suddenly, the ground rumbled, vibrating his body beneath mine.

I sat up with a gasp, wondering if this could be my feverish wish coming true. Welcoming the idea, I watched as the tree shook with an ever-brightening glow and the wilted blue flower floated up before falling onto Leander's hand.

As if on cue, all the fallen petals below the tree rose in the air. They began to rotate over his body, quickening until they were a swarm over him. Suddenly, they stopped, remained suspended in the air for moment, before they showered down on him. The moment they touched his body, the dried, shriveled petals transformed, revived, covering every part of him.

Bursting to my feet, my heart fluttered like a bee's wings, so fast the beats blurred. I could only hold my breath, and stare through now-frozen tears.

Suddenly, a hand came out of the pile of velvety, dewy petals. Without thinking, I immediately gripped it, stumbling back to pull at it.

But what rose out of the multicolored cocoon wasn't Leander!

A man stood in oversized clothes unsteadily, his breathing agitated, eyes downcast. His thick but sleek, brown hair undulated down to his mid-back, his brows thick and arched, his nose long and proud. A short, dark beard covered his chiseled jaw and he was a bit shorter than Leander, smaller too, his shoulders wide, his waist slim, his limbs powerful and proportionate. The hands he was staring at with disbelief had long fingers and several broken nails, but no hair or claws.

Then, chest rising and falling rapidly—he held them out to me.

My own shaking out of control, I met them halfway, pressing my palms against his, staring at their human size that still dwarfed my own.

I knew what this had to mean, who this was, but my mind lagged, unable to process this could have really happened. That after I believed I lost him, I was really looking at…

"Leander?"

"It's me." His whisper cracked before he gasped, then broke into weary, wheezing chuckles. "Bonnie, it's me—*it's me*!"

He repeated, over and over, as if he couldn't believe it.

Cacophony suddenly burst from the balcony. Shrill screams, stampeding feet, loud calls, crashing furniture. Everyone had reverted to their human selves too?

In moments, the unmistakable sounds of joy and relief made it clear they had. It made him give me a huge, fangless grin that struck me dumb.

One of two things was happening. Either this was a cruel dream or a magnificent reality. After being struck down so many times, I had a hard time accepting it was the latter.

Still unsure, I sought out his eyes. Even in the dimness, they were an unmistakable turquoise, the pure, vivid hue of gemstones, sparkling with a sheen of wet silver. The very same ones that remained constant no matter his state.

"How do I know it's you and not a fairy trick?"

He frowned at me, a familiar expression on an unrecognizable face.

Suddenly, he burst out laughing, his guffaws ringing throughout the castle grounds. "Are you *serious*?"

My mouth wobbled up as every emotion from shock to disbelief to relief coursed through me in a flood, flushing out all anguish and despair. "You did it to me, so it's only fair. Now, tell me something only my beast would know."

He raised his large but human hands to cup my jaw, bringing his nose to mine, rubbing against it, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. "Your beast gave you an ancient apothecary text, one I don't think you've read."

"Reading it was a chore, and you know it! Its spelling was all over the place."

"Hence it being ancient, and written long before spelling was standardized," he said. "It's almost as ancient as your father."

That did it for me. A laugh erupted in my throat, escaping in near-manic giggles.

This was no trick. He was my beast, my Leander.

I set my shaking hands over his, tracing the human shape and skin, examining his face in escalating elation.

I had once theorized about his true appearance, from what I put together of the face he'd slashed in his family portrait. I'd wondered what a merge between his parents would be, how much his beastly version had retained of his real self.

On closer inspection, he was somewhat similar to the beast form I'd first seen, and almost like the approximation in my head—but very different all the same.

Similar, different, familiar, unrecognizable, whatever he looked like now—it was *him.* When I thought I'd never get to see him again, in any form, with the way the curse…

I gasped. "Strange."

Anxiety crept into his eyes. "Strange as in interesting, or as in bad?"

"As in I can barely register what's happening." The extreme shift between experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss, followed by *this*—this inebriating surge of happiness, was unbelievable. "The curse, it—it broke!"

He nodded, looking as shaken, as disbelieving. "It did. You saved me—you saved us all."

"I didn't do anything! I don't know how it happened! I…"

I stopped, swallowed hard. I didn't care what happened or how it broke. I just cared that he was with me, alive, smiling, and looking at me with the same fierce love in his eyes.

I finally launched myself at him, the urge to weep again overwhelming me. "I thought you died! You were just lying there, not breathing, heart stopped—then this happened and I-I went from desperate to overjoyed, so much so—I don't know what to do!"

"I don't, either. I can't believe I'm me again, that it's over." He drew away to look at me, to run his hands down my arms, as if he he'd never get enough of looking at me, or touching me.

"I hoped the happiest days would be ahead of us, but it will be hard to top tonight," I said, feeling myself grinning like a lunatic.

"Challenge accepted." He tilted my head up with a tender finger below my chin as he lowered his head, no longer needing to bend at the waist to reach me.

Then he pressed his lips to mine.

This. The kiss I didn't know I'd been waiting for my whole life.

Heart blossoming with yet a new level of happiness, drowning in thankfulness, I threw my arms around his neck and brought him closer, returning his kiss with everything in me—then pulled back with a giggle.

He anxiously brought his hand to his mouth. "What is it?"

I rubbed my face, laughing again. “Not the breath, the beard. It’s like I rubbed a bristle brush on my face.”

He snorted, looking relieved, stroking his bushy jaw. “I was about to ask what we should do now that our impossible goal has been achieved. It looks like my next chore is a very possible, thorough grooming.”

“As for what we’ll do after that, I seem to remember you had a step-by-step plan for us once we returned.” I stopped. “How different will you look without the beard? I’m just getting used to you like this!”

“If you don’t like me clean shaven, all you have to do is stick around to see it grow back,” he teased, gathering me into his arms again.

“Since I also seem to remember you offered yourself to me anyway, I’ll have you, and since I chose to have you for good, I’ll be around to see you shave it off then grow it back a million times.”

Throwing his head back, he laughed heartily, a sound and sight that made me want to sweep him in another dance all night.

Sobering, he cupped my face again tenderly, before bending to kiss me again, and again, murmuring against my lips, “I’ll hold you to that.”

My lips spread in a smile of bliss against his as I whispered back, “I’m counting on it.”

Finally, reluctantly separating us, Leander took my hand in his.

We turned to look at the rose tree, and before our stunned eyes, it grew larger, its leaves tripling, and among them a countless number of roses burst into being, boasting petals of every color, some metallic, others glittering, all in full bloom.

I didn’t know how long we stood staring at this promise of unlimited time and chances together, hugging each other and shaking and laughing in gratefulness and relief. Then he finally led us back into the castle, now a brighter, livelier space, full of happy people bound on making the best of their second chance in life.

It could have been Etheline who’d broken the curse, after all. It could have been a dozen other things, every little experience we’d been together, everything we felt for each other. It could be something else completely, in this world full of convoluted secrets and unpredictable magic.

But for once in my life, I didn’t want to know how or why. I just wanted to be.

And I wanted to be with him.

EPILOGUE

Autumn was turning out to be a great time for weddings.

The first official wedding of the newly returned Duke of Briarfell, and his bride, the new duchess, borrowed a lot of elements from Queen Rowena's Court. In fact, it actually borrowed some of the attendants and decorations.

Nobles, friends, staff, relatives and twice as many townsfolk filled the castle, celebrating Clancy and Jessmine with us. After it had stood forlorn and accursed for years, it finally had its gates open and its curtains drawn, the light of day, the smell of food, and the sound of cheer filling its walls.

Gliding along the room in yet another yellow "tulip" gown, taking it all in, I was amazed yet again. At everything that had brought me to this moment. At how I had gone from being stuck in a small town, counting the people I barely knew on one hand, to befriending and being related to so many people—and fairies.

Clancy, still getting used to walking on his feet again, hobbled around the ball room on wobbling ankles. He led Jessamine around, proudly and enthusiastically introducing her to attendees, while she hid most of her reactions in her bouquet of red heleniums. His curly, auburn hair was combed, thanks to the lack of horns, and she wore a dress that buttoned up from the back, emphasizing the absence of wings, though some of her shed feathers were in her hair, gilded and stabilizing her updo. A bittersweet keepsake.

I hadn't seen her without her tiara since Clancy had placed it on her head during their wedding in Autumn. She was convinced it had what she called "compensation magic," made to sense and make up for all the

hardships she'd endured in life. How else could she now be Clancy's bride and a duchess?

I'd been unable to get confirmation of that, and was certain that Clancy married her because he loved her, but who was to say that the tiara's magic hadn't helped smooth things out? If not completely, going by how she kept catching my eye, and making faces in the direction of some of his acquaintances and relatives. She looked either annoyed, fed-up, or amused, as she fielded intrusive or condescending questions and comments, or just very stupid ones.

But overall, I'd never seen them look happier.

She now left Clancy caught between four stuffy-looking men, and rushed to my side.

I looked around the castle as I linked my arm in hers. "I can't believe I'm going to have to run this place soon. And you'll run the one in Briarfell with Clancy's sisters."

Jessamine side-eyed said sisters. The youngest, Lucasta, had come with her husband and toddler, and was ecstatic and friendly. Clarinda, the eldest, had snubbed us both, deigning only to speak with other noblewomen. Leander, who'd filled me in on our guests, had explained why. She had expected Clancy would do his brotherly duty by arranging for her to marry his friend, the crown prince.

Jessamine shuddered. "In that case, I hope Clarinda marries someone who moves her to the other end of the kingdom. I can only handle so many Gestums at a time."

I couldn't help snorting.

"What?"

"I just realized your name is now Jessamine Gestum."

Jessamine made a startled noise. "Remind me to ban all potential baby names that start with a J-sound."

"So, we won't be expecting a Lord Jaybird or Lady Juniper anytime soon?" I said coyly.

"No, but naming my firstborn after a bird seems only logical." She suddenly leaned in to whisper. "I don't miss the body, or how inconvenient it was, but I miss flying. Think your aunt could gift us a pegasus to remedy that loss?"

I squeezed her hand in sympathy. "I will sure ask her."

Clancy escaped his latest inquisition and rushed towards us with his book tucked under his arm. It had turned out to be the ultimate prize to him, giving him answers to almost any question his heart desired. He soon whisked her off, leaving me to be accosted by other attendees.

After managing to slip away, I picked a glass of cider off a butler's tray, and retreated to sit against a window. I needed a break after being grilled by Leander's little sister, Princess Esmeralda. Esme was an excitable little girl, who took after the queen in all but demeanor, and that meant she was eager to talk to me. Not knowing how much I was allowed to tell her, I'd soon run out of answers. Leander noticed my distress and rushed to scoop her up and swing her around in the center of the ballroom. Their laughter now rang off every wall, earning a range of looks, from disapproving to amused.

The youngest of his family, Prince Florian, a spitting image of the king, was too young to understand the reason for Leander's three-year absence. It didn't seem to matter, as he was more interested in playing with my cousins, Finnian and Fiona, and Oliver, who was not-so-discreetly telling them about all the castle's secret passageways.

Though some were concerned about the presence of fairies, none, not even Queen Zomoroda herself, dared to say anything about my family and those who accompanied them. In fact, she said nothing at all to my uncle and his wife, who chatted with King Florent, a tall, haggard-looking man with greying, blond hair. Curiously, Leander's father seemed very intrigued by Ossian, who had no qualms answering his every intrusive question about life as a fairy queen's consort, an opportunity Florent himself had passed on with Etheline.

After a heartwarming reunion with their son, and a lukewarm welcome to me, the royal couple had been tiptoeing around us, especially after Leander told them that we knew the true story of the curse.

Now we were all waiting for Fairuza to return from Cahraman to discuss her fate, as well as our future. He didn't want to get married unless her own curse broke and she could attend. And I wanted to wait until I found Adelaide, and was shown all the ropes of being a prince's wife, and the princess of the whole of Arbore. It was safe to say we'd take our time with this engagement.

As for my father, he'd joined us with Rowena and Ossian, bearing no news on Ella or Keenan. The magic mirror hadn't shown him anything

relevant of their situation before he returned it to me. The last time it let me see a glimpse of them this morning, Keenan was driving a hurtling, pumpkin-shaped carriage, with Ella sticking her head out of the window, wild-eyed and ashen-faced, hair flying in the wind.

Whatever was going on, there was nothing I could do about it now. All I could do was wait to be reunited with both my friends from Aubenaire.

The king and queen hadn't yet spoken to my father, not that that appeared to upset him. He seemed far more interested in helping Ivy as she checked on the food, and how the wedding reception was going. Of all the staff members, her human form was the most different from her beastly one, with her being an extremely pretty, short, thirty-something woman with curly brown hair, chubby cheeks and hazel eyes.

It had always been conflicting, seeing him attempt to find me stepmothers, because it had felt more for my sake, than his longing for companionship. That, and I had always felt offended on my mother's behalf, believing them to have had a marriage that was built on a great love that defied their families' wills. Finding out that had been the case, but in a totally different and disheartening context, had lifted the rosy tint in my mind.

Of all the answers I'd gotten, I would never know the full truth about my mother. Why she'd broken off her engagement to King Yulian, if she had really loved my father, or if he had been her way out of her situation. I'd always wonder if she'd known it would backfire in a curse that would rob her and her betrothed of their life, my father of a wife, and me of a mother.

But I supposed some things were better off unknown.

Feeling a bit melancholy at the thought of my parents, I sought out a distraction, and was surprised to find Castor Woodbine with Jessamine's brothers, Glenn and Sir Dale, talking to some of the kitchen girls. Hazel, daughter of the head cook, and former rabbit, seemed to have struck up something with Glenn during his stay in the castle. Jessamine was going to have a good hard laugh at this.

Last to sneak in were Robin, still covering half his face, his arm fully healed, and Will Scarlet. I went straight for them, jabbing Will in the side. "Don't you dare think about taking any of the knives."

Will jumped, slamming into Robin, who grinned at me. "Miss Fairborn, we almost didn't recognize you."

“What happened to you?” Will waved his hands about my head, aghast.

“Long story short, I fell in some magic water, grew pointy ears and six-inches, and found my long-lost relatives—and here they are.” I pointed to Rowena and Ossian with the king, who seemed very entertained by my uncle. “What about you, Robin Hood? What happened to you while we were gone?”

Robin’s eyes widened. “Robin Hood? Last I heard, they were calling me the Green Hood.”

“I’ve also heard of a Roger Godberd and a version where you were some sort of hobgoblin, and that you’ve been in several towns at once,” I pointed out. “You’ve become a bit of a folk hero in the past couple of years.”

“So has the Beast of Rosemead.” Robin jerked his head in Leander’s direction, now introducing my father to his own. “Though he’s more of a local legend than a hero, I suppose. Have I become a figure that spreads as much fear in the hearts of bad men, though?”

“From what I know and saw in the few gazettes I’ve gotten, stories have been going around about the fun time you’ve been showing Prince Jonquil in the king’s absence. I’m tempted to write them all down.”

He was pleased with that prospect. “After you write your own?”

My head spun at the thought of reliving my adventure so soon. “I think I’d like to wait for ours to cool down a little before touching it. Besides, Clancy said he’d like to dramatize our experience first.”

“Good call.” He clinked his glass against mine. “Did you find your ‘cousin’?”

“No, but Leander said his father sent word to the new king of Cahraman to look for her. What about your sister, Will? Marian, was it?”

Both Will and Robin’s postures softened, weighed down with sadness.

“No,” said Will. “But we’re planning on finding her soon, especially now that we know you’ve gone to Faerie to find Leander, and managed it.”

I held off on mentioning Ella, trying to reassure myself that Keenan would help her, and Rowena and Ossian would tell me when all was resolved. They were engineering a fairy path that led from the castle grounds and straight to their court for me to come and go as I pleased.

There had also been talks of Arbore contacting Ericura, but that was something to be left to the king and his council.

“Speaking of Leander.” Robin looked behind me. “Where did he go?”

Following his line of sight, I found Leander gone from the room and alarm bells rang in my head. The last time he disappeared during a party, I'd found him on the other side of a mountain in another land.

"I'll be right back." I picked up my skirts and rushed around, asking my father, uncle and the king if they had seen where he went.

"Someone called for him, said it was important…" the king trailed off, eyes widening at something outside the window.

A woman with fluffy red hair held up by a wreath of blue and green flowers was idly passing by. I wasted no time hustling my skirts out of the ballroom, and into the gardens, past other guests, local children, and all the way to the area before Leander's study.

I found Etheline stopping before the rose tree, running a hand over its trunk. Without turning to me, she said, "I wonder how many have tried stealing a rose from this."

I approached her, hesitant. "What would happen to him if someone did?"

"Nothing, really," she said, sounding pleased. "It's more of an ornament than an hourglass now, and it will continue blooming new roses in place of those that wilt."

And I blurted out, "Etheline, how did the curse break?"

That gained me her full attention, a head-turn so fast it almost toppled her hairstyle from its wreath. "Are you telling me you don't know what finally did it?"

I shook my head. "One minute it looked like I had lost him and the next, there he was, as he is now."

"Just like that?" she hummed interestedly, approaching me with a twinkle in her eye. "You did nothing?"

"Nothing at all, which really has me questioning the way your curse worked."

Etheline took my hands in hers, shaking them earnestly. "You were ready to put your life on hold, leave all those you ached to return to, all the places you wished to go, things you longed to do, to put his feelings and needs first. That is something you wouldn't do for just anyone, but for him, specifically, out of no obligation other than your love for him." She beamed at me, a bewitching ethereal smile that matched her glowing eyes and pearlescent skin. "That was the act of love that broke the curse."

The flutter of a dozen butterflies filled my chest, then they flew off, letting me breathe easy. “Really?”

She shut her eyes in a content nod. “You two have done what his father and your mother couldn’t. He put your happiness first, time and time again, and you kept your promise to him, then made a new promise, an even harder one, when the old one became null and void. True love and fidelity. That is what you have together. That is something even I hope to find someday.”

Though I had been fine not knowing, the fact that I had kept my promise added something extra, a certainty, a profound satisfaction, to our triumph over the curse.

From one of the open windows, I heard someone calling for me.

I gave her hand a grateful squeeze before stepping back. “What will you do now?”

“Oh, you two were just one part of my goal to tie up loose ends.” Etheline gave me one last knowing look before beginning to dissolve in a shower of glimmers.

The Queen of Spring was gone before I could ask for an explanation, and the calls for me grew louder as Leander appeared in the balcony.

Broad shoulders hugged in his royal blue tailcoat, trimmed hair brushed back, his face stubbly, he was a vision in the afternoon light. A magnificent sight full of spontaneity and vitality. My heart pirouetted in my chest at seeing him forgetting the reserve he’d fallen into since our guests arrived, reverting to doing his best to hide himself from others.

I would never get tired of seeing him like this.

“Bonnie, what are you doing here?”

“Me? Where did you go?”

He raised an envelope, waving it excitedly. “We got word back from Cahraman!”

My heart gave a thunderous clap as I lifted my skirt and bounced up, attempting to land on the balcony sill. I ended up crashing into him with a squeal.

He caught me, guffawing at my uncoordinated state, but taking advantage of the moment to steal a quick kiss and embrace.

Knowing I was burning with urgency, he set me back on my feet, and handed me the letter. I tore it open, every nerve buzzing with anticipation of finally having word of my best friend’s location and condition.

Except it wasn’t a report. Or even really a letter.

It was an invitation.

To His Royal Highness, Prince Leander of Arbore
& Miss Bonnibel Fairborn,

You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of King Cyaxares VI of Cahraman and Princess Adelaide of Almaskham.

My legs wobbled beneath me as I stopped reading.

“Princess—wedding—please tell me this means what I think it means!”

“It does.” He took another envelope out of his pocket. “Cyaxares attached a letter from Adelaide herself.”

I snatched it out of his hand. Before I tore it open, I bit my lip as I looked up at him. “What about Fairuza?”

He shook his head, sadness dimming his brilliant eyes. “He wasn’t the one to break her curse.”

I gripped his arm. “We’ll find another way!”

“Yes, we will.”

Now I knew Adelaide was more than safe, was living her own fairytale, I had to believe Fairuza’s situation would end as favorably.

He forced a smile as he tapped the letter prompting me, “Now read your friend’s report. It seems that we weren’t the only ones to go through such a strange and magical journey.”

I jumped up into his waiting arms and kissed him as I said, “And we won’t be the last.”

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you've enjoyed BEAUTY OF ROSEMEAD, the final installment in the Rosemead Duology as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Reviews and word of mouth are the life-blood of Indie Authors, so if you enjoyed the book, please help me spread the word!

Even a line on Amazon, Goodreads and Bookbub would be vital to my success and to the book's sales, and would be hugely appreciated.

If you haven't yet, please read where it all began in the #1 Amazon Bestsellers, THIEF OF CAHRAMAN and PRINCE OF CAHRAMAN and QUEEN OF CAHRAMAN and BEAST OF ROSEMEAD.

We can expect PRINCESS OF MIDNIGHT, a Cinderella retelling, sometime this winter!

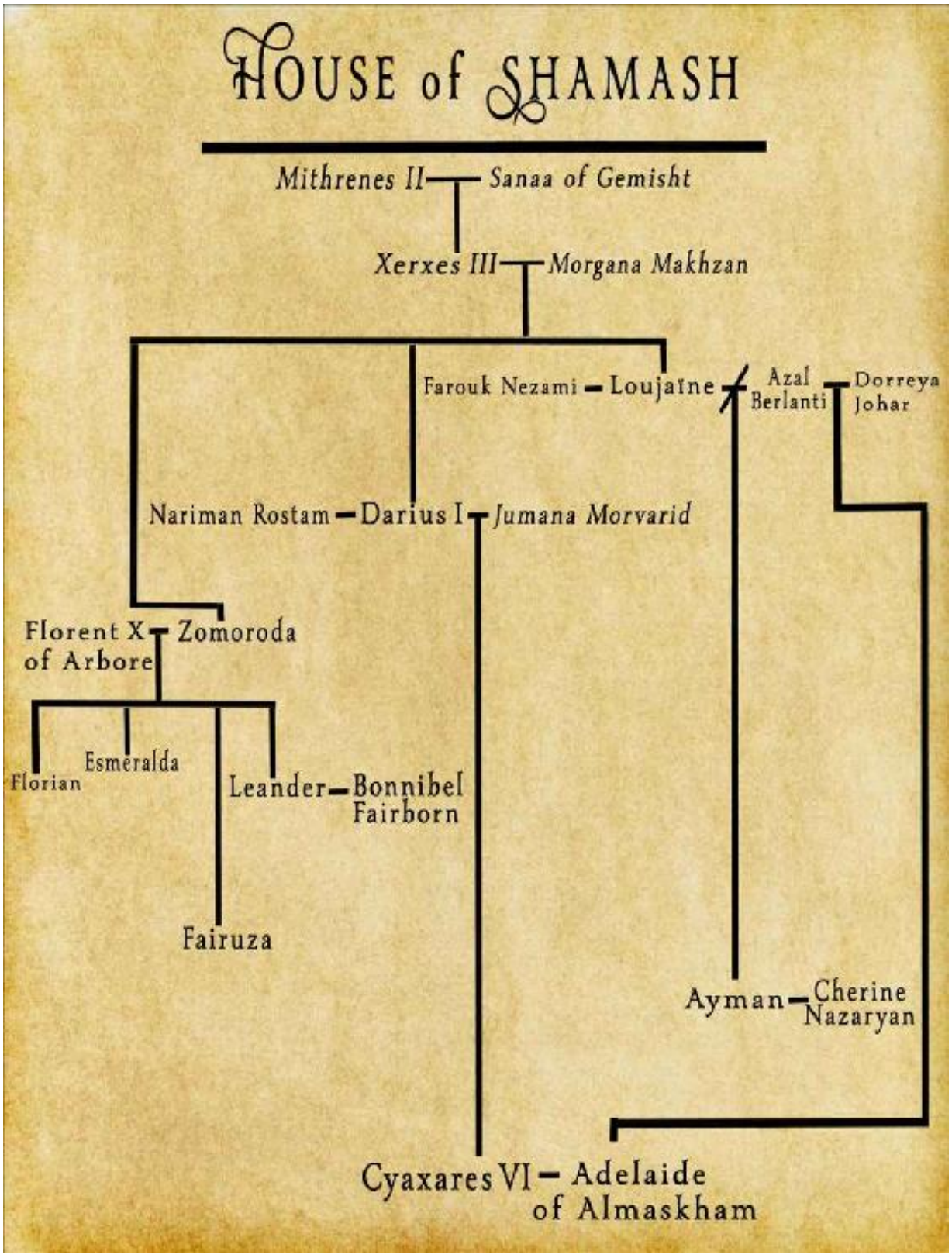
To find out when it's out, and other exclusive content, news, updates and offers, please sign up to my VIP Mailing List.

I also love to hear from my readers, so please contact me at lucytempestauthor@gmail.com

Thank you for reading!

Lucy

FAMILY TREE


HOUSE of SHAMASH
Mithrenes II
Sanaa of Gemisht
Xerxes III
Morgana Makhzan
Farouk Nezami
Loujaine
Azal Berlanti
Dorreya Johar
Nariman Rostam
Darius I
Jumana Morvarid
Florent X of Arbore
Zomoroda
Florian
Esmeralda
Leander
Bonnibel Fairborn
Fairuza
Ayman
Cherine Nazaryan
Cyaxares VI
Adelaide of Almaskham

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

— People

Bonnibel: Bonna-bell
Etheline: Eth-ell-leen
Fairuza: Fay-roo-zah
Jessamine: Jess-ah-meen
Leander: Lee-ann-durr
Ornella: Ore-nell-ah
Ossian: Oh-sheen
Seamus: Shay-muss

— Places:

Ericura: Air-ree-cue-ruh
Almaskham: Ul-maz-kham
Arbore: Are-bore
Cahraman: Quh-rah-maahn
Campania: Kaam-pahn-yuh
Nexia: Neck-see-yah

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With one foot in reality and the other one lodged firmly in fantasy, Lucy Tempest has been spinning tales since she learned how to speak.

Now, as an author, people can experience the worlds she creates for themselves.

Lucy lives in Southern California with her family and two spoiled cats, who would make terrible familiars.

Her young adult fantasy series FAIRYTALES OF FOLKSHORE is a collection of interconnected fairytale retellings, each with a unique twist on a beloved, timeless tale.

Sign up to her VIP mailing list at https://www.lucytempest.com/newsletter

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Thief of Cahraman

Prince of Cahraman

Queen of Cahraman

Beast of Rosemead

Beauty of Rosemead